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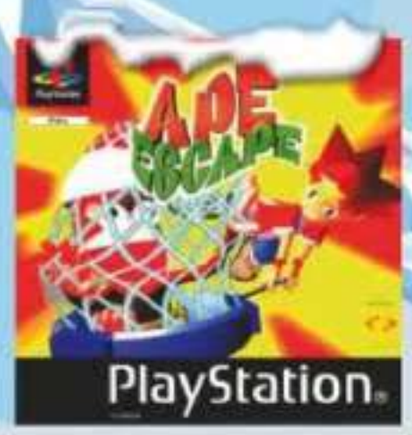

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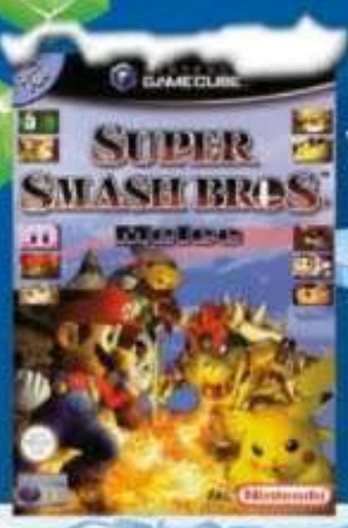

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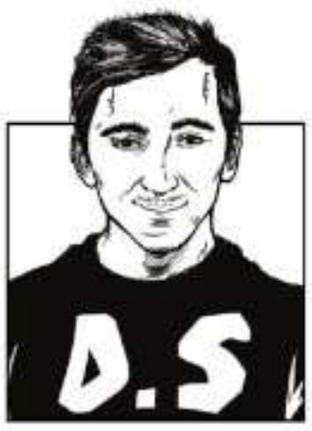
THE RETROBATES

WHAT WOULD YOUR FORCE POWER BE?

DARRAN JONES

Being able to alter someone's mind would allow me to do all sorts of ter... being able to alter someone's mind would allow me to do all sorts of good things.

Expertise: Juggling a gorgeous wife, two beautiful girls and an award-winning magazine
Currently playing: Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age
Favourite game of all time: Strider



DREW SLEEP

It's probably Force Healing, considering how well I bounce back after the traumatic process of sending an issue of **Retro Gamer** to the printers.

Expertise: 'Die Hard Is A Christmas Film' evangelism
Currently playing: Pokémon Sword
Favourite game of all time: Final Fantasy VIII

NICK THORPE

There are too many good ones, so it's very hard to choose, but after careful consideration of all the *Star Wars* lore, I'm pretty sure mine would be the Vulcan mind meld.

Expertise: Owning five Master Systems (I sold two)
Currently playing: Shenmue III
Favourite game of all time: Sonic The Hedgehog

ANDY SALTER

My power would be Tapas, which gives me the power to provide a small portion of Spanish cuisine to my fellow Jedi... wait, what do you mean that's not what it does?

Expertise: Modding games, no 'vanilla' versions for me, thanks!
Currently playing: *Europa Barbarorum 2* mod for *Medieval II: Total War*
Favourite game of all time: *Rome: Total War*

GRAEME MASON

The lightsaber throw is impossibly cool, and very useful. I'd probably end up severing one of my own limbs, though.

Expertise: Adjusting the tape azimuth with a screwdriver
Currently playing: Gaiares
Favourite game of all time: Resident Evil IV

PAUL DRURY

I'd like the control Force ability to detoxify poison so I can enjoy an evening on the sauce without going to the dark side the next morning.

Expertise: David Walliams' Union Jack pants
Currently playing: Death Stranding
Favourite game of all time: Sheep In Space

PAUL ROSE

I'd like to come back as a Force ghost. They're not going to get rid of me that easily.

Expertise: Winging it
Currently playing: Rage 2
Favourite game of all time: Half-Life 2

PAUL WALKER-EMIG

Research tells me that within the *Star Wars* universe exists a Force power that allow users to detoxify themselves of poison. I would use this power to get drunk and then purge myself so that there's no hangover in the morning.

Expertise: Pretentious indie games
Currently playing: Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order
Favourite game of all time: Metal Gear Solid

ADAM BARNES

Well, actually I'd be more like Boba Fett because of my unexplained love of jetpacks.

Expertise: Being pretentious about coffee
Currently playing: Shenmue 3
Favourite game of all time: Baldur's Gate

LOADING...

So here we are at the end of 2019. As I write this it's not only the end of a year, it's also the end of a decade, and what a decade it's been. The world of retro has changed considerably since **Retro Gamer** was first launched in 2004, and it's amazing to think the magazine is shortly going to be celebrating its 15th anniversary.

Equally exciting is the fact that we're finally getting the end of the original *Star Wars* saga that began in 1977 (you may have watched it multiple times already). It's given us the perfect excuse to look at *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic*, arguably one of the greatest videogames to feature the *Star Wars* name. We've spoken to several key staff, including co-founder Greg Zeschuk, to discover how the talented team created the epic RPG set 4,000 years before the events of *A New Hope*, and the difficulties they faced while making it, including an intense crunch period.

We're not just about celebrating an amazing *Star Wars* game, as we've got plenty more to excite, including an interesting glimpse inside Arc System Works, an insightful interview with Big Boy Barry, and an essential collector's guide to the *Castlevania* franchise.

Make sure you take advantage of our latest subs offer on page 30 so you don't miss the chance to kick off 2020 in fine style.

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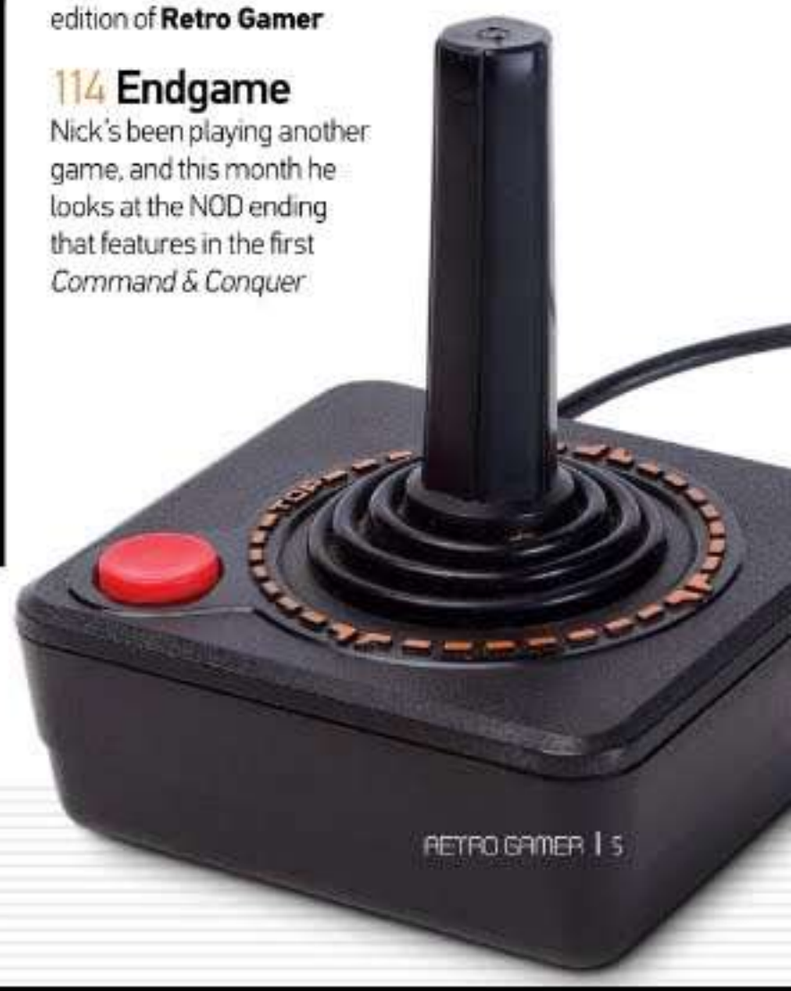

YU SUZUKI STRIKES GOLD

The legendary ex-AM2 developer wins the Lifetime Achievement award at the Golden Joysticks

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Nick's time machine has landed in a new old year, join him as he explores 2003

The 37th annual Golden Joystick Awards took place on 15 November at the Bloomsbury Big Top in London, celebrating the best games of the last 12 months. While there was plenty of love for classic gaming series on show, the big highlight for **Retro Gamer** was the Lifetime Achievement award, which was given to Yu Suzuki – the director of timeless hits including *Space Harrier*, *Virtua Fighter* and *Shenmue*.

Unlike most of the categories, which are voted on by the public, the recipient of this award was decided by the judging panel – and Suzuki netted the award just days before the release of his latest game, the long-awaited *Shenmue III*. The award was presented by Three Fields Entertainment's Alex Ward, who spoke about having grown up around arcade games during the Eighties, and how much of an influence Suzuki's hits had been on his own games, including *Burnout* and *Dangerous Driving*. The show then cut to a video appearance from Peter Moore, who was president of Sega Of America during the Dreamcast years. The current Liverpool FC CEO recalled the help that his team received from Suzuki, whom Peter described as "a gem of a man". Suzuki then came onto the stage to accept the award, where he noted that this was coincidentally his 37th year in game development, and thanked all the attendees.

We were able to catch up with Yu Suzuki to get his thoughts on receiving the award, as well as his thoughts on the games business and next steps. "The Golden Joystick Awards name conjures up the image of arcade games and retro games, so it gives me the feeling that these are awards with history and heritage," said Suzuki. "It's such an honour to receive it after over 30 years in my career." Thinking about how he imagined things would be like in 2020 in the Eighties, compared to the actual development of technology over his long career, he says, "Talking about the year 2020, what I was thinking back then was probably closer to what's depicted in sci-fi movies, in that kind of world. But I never even thought about how smartphones could have advanced as much as this."

Looking back on what has made his career so noteworthy, Suzuki feels that it's important to ensure a constant flow of new ideas. "Because my games are eclectic, and I've challenged different types of genre over the years, what I tend to do is every time I challenge myself with a new game, I work with a new team," he replies.

» We were able to catch up with Yu Suzuki to get his thoughts on the award, *Shenmue III* and his future.

> **"It's such an honour to receive it after over 30 years in my career"**
> Yu Suzuki

» The Golden Joystick Awards were hosted in London, and attracted guests from across the games industry.

"If you do that, it means that you can avoid repeating what's been done before." Looking back, did he have any particular favourite games? "The most memorable games for me, the most personal, are *Virtua Fighter* and *Shenmue*. Those two titles were both challenging in their own way," he reflects. "In the case of *Virtua Fighter*, that was the first 3D game with human motions for me. In the case of *Shenmue*, because it was the first time we were challenging the open world environments, that was again challenging in its own way."

Suzuki's most recent game is *Shenmue III*, which hit PS4 and PC in November 2019. To say the production of the game has been fraught would be an understatement – for many years, even the most passionate fan would have been forgiven for considering it impossible, until the 2015 Kickstarter campaign that enabled Ryo Hazuki to finally leave that cave. "Just to be able to make *Shenmue III* at all was a huge joy for me, as well as a huge opportunity for me," says Suzuki. "I'm just so happy to be able to create this game." You can get a sense of the difficulties that were faced in creating the game, though. "Because it was the first time I started using Unreal Engine 4, it was a challenge to get used to that new type of engine. I had to create the team from scratch, that was also challenging. Also, as the number of partners grew, we had to change what the content plan was – every time we needed to change it, we had to adjust accordingly." You can find out what we thought of the game on page 98.

» [Arcade] *Space Harrier* is an oddity in Suzuki's catalogue, as one of the few fantasy-themed games to his name.

» [Arcade] Suzuki's most prolific series is *Virtua Fighter*, as he's credited as director for the first four games.

» [PS4] *Shenmue III* is out now, and represents Suzuki's return to console game development after over a decade away.

With *Shenmue III* finally out in the wild, what's next for the revered games designer? "This is not the end of the *Shenmue* series, it doesn't complete the *Shenmue* series," he explains. "So maybe a sequel, that's a possibility." But fans of Suzuki's other works shouldn't worry, as he quickly qualifies that. "I'm not just the creator of *Shenmue*, so there might be a possibility to explore other titles as well." Might that include a return to the arcade arena? He doesn't rule it out. "The arcade game is a starting point for me, so one day it would be great if I can return to that," he says, which is a prospect that will surely excite fans of elaborate motion cabinets. But in his closing message to readers, he remains resolutely focused on the present. "To all *Shenmue* fans, as well as those who never had a chance to play the games, this is a game unlike any other in the world," Suzuki concludes. "This is the kind of game that if you play it in a relaxed environment, it's a really heartwarming type of game. I'd love everyone to try this game."

WHAT ELSE HAPPENED?

Yu Suzuki wasn't the only one to claim a Golden Joystick this year

As well as recognition for Yu Suzuki's pioneering career, there was plenty of representation for retro releases at this year's show. *Castlevania Anniversary Collection* was nominated for Xbox Game Of The Year, but fell to eventual winner *Gears 5*. *Tetris Effect* was nominated for PlayStation Game Of The Year, but lost out to double award winner *Days Gone*, and also picked up nominations for Best Audio and Best VR/AR Game. *Tetris 99* also picked up two nominations, being beaten to Nintendo Game Of The Year by the nostalgia-packed *Super Smash Bros Ultimate*. Sega's Mega Drive Mini was nominated alongside the Nintendo Switch Lite and Oculus Quest in the Best Gaming Hardware category, but lost out to Nvidia's RTX 20 series of PC graphics cards.

The big winners of the night were Capcom. As well as taking home the Best Visual Design award for *Devil May Cry 5*, the developer scored the night's only other double win with *Resident Evil 2*. This year's remake of the 1998 zombie horror game picked up the Best Audio award (doubtless for Mr X's terrifying footsteps), and also won Ultimate Game Of The Year. That's the first time a remake has ever won this award!

RETURN OF THE PAC

May 22, 2020 marks the 40th anniversary of *Pac-Man*, so expect a flurry of releases focusing around the yellow pill muncher throughout the year. While Pac-Man might be well known for never keeping his mouth shut, Namco is being extremely tight-lipped about its plans for the iconic videogame star beyond setting up a new website and showing off a funky new logo. It has, however, unveiled an official new *Pac-Man* song by legendary techno composer Ken Ishii called *Join The Pac*, which has to be seen to be believed. You can check it out by visiting pacman.com/en.

SUPER MARIO LAND GOES BIG

The internet recently got into a tizzy after DiskHacker uploaded an impressive version of *Super Mario Land* for the SNES. The Game Boy classic has been completely upgraded from its monochrome origins, and has a similar graphical style to *New Super Mario Bros*, along with sound effects from *Super Mario 64*. It's surprisingly close to the original game in terms of level design from what we've played, but the movement of Mario could certainly do with a little work. There's every chance the game get shuts down by the time you read this (Nintendo gonna Nintendo), but it's great to see such wonders still being created for Nintendo's 16-bit console.

BIT-MAPPING OUT THE FUTURE

REBELLION REVEALS THAT GAMES BY THE BITMAP BROTHERS ARE RETURNING

If you think of the Amiga or Atari ST, one of the first companies that probably pops up in your brain is The Bitmap Brothers. While it started off on the 8-bits, the talented developer arguably found most of its success on the 16-bit systems, thanks to the likes of *Xenon 2*, *Cadaver*, *Gods*, *The Chaos Engine*, and the brilliant *Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe*.

We're clearly not the only big fans of the popular developer, as Rebellion has just revealed that it has purchased the company's entire back catalogue of games for an undisclosed sum. "We're delighted with the addition of The Bitmap Brothers to the ever-growing Rebellion portfolio," Rebellion's CEO and co-founder Jason Kingsley OBE recently revealed in a press release about the acquisition. "The Bitmap Brothers are renowned for making great games and for bringing gaming into the mainstream with inimitable style. We've known Mike Montgomery for many years, and we're honoured by the faith and trust that he has shown in us by passing on the torch. We'll strive to be vigilant custodians of one of gaming's great names."

» [PC] Games like *Speedball 2* have already been remade for PC, but we'd love a proper compilation of games.

"We'll strive to be vigilant custodians of one of gaming's great names"

» Chris (left) and Jason Kingsley pose with Mike Montgomery (right) to celebrate Rebellion's new announcement.

» [PC] If this doesn't get announced for the PS5 we'll be very surprised.

Of course, this isn't the first time that Rebellion has taken an interest in older games, as the company acquired the rights to *Battlezone* in 2013 and then delivered a number of solid games in subsequent years, including a great VR game that felt like a cross between the arcade original and the Eighties classic, *Tron*. It would appear that the Kingsley's plan to not only make the original games easily accessible on new platforms, but also to create new releases based on past games.

Several games are already available on the streaming service AntStream, while *Gods* was recently remade, and there are also updates of *The Chaos Engine* and *Speedball 2* available on PC. Personally we'd love a HD update of *Xenon 2*, but in all honesty we'd be equally happy to play new games from both franchises, providing they retain the same quality and distinctive style that made Bitmap Brothers games so popular in the first place. The Kingsleys have proven in the past that Rebellion isn't the sort of company to acquire a licence and then do nothing with it, so don't be surprised if you hear more news about this exciting acquisition sooner rather than later.

» [PC] *Gods* was remastered last year. Hopefully Rebellion will be turning its attention to shooters like *Xenon* next.

HALF-LIFE IS BACK

VALVE'S GAME RETURNS, BUT NOT AS YOU'D EXPECT

No, you've not fallen into an alternative dimension; there really is a brand-new *Half-Life* game, and it really is being made by those lovers of transactional hats, Valve. Before you get too excited, though, it's worth mentioning that this isn't going to be *Half-Life 3*. Stopped shouting? Good. No, this new game is called *Half-Life: Alyx*, and is set shortly before Gordon Freeman's return in *Half-Life 2*. As you may have already guessed, it will focus on Alyx and her father taking on the Combine.

The reason we're really excited about *Half-Life: Alyx* is because it's going to be made for VR systems, and if you've ever played any first-person games on systems like PSVR and Occulus Rift, you'll understand just how immersive Valve's game has the potential to be. Best of all, there's not going to be too long to wait either, as the game is currently scheduled to arrive on PCs in March. No news on a PSVR release, but we're keeping our motion controllers crossed, just in case.

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Who is Iain Lee?
Iain Lee is a freelance broadcaster who loves gaming, particularly retro gaming. He currently hosts *The Late Night Alternative* show at weekdays from 10pm on www.talkradio.co.uk and runs daily retro streams on www.twitch.tv/iainlee.

Chu Chu

Something magic happened a few weeks ago. I was wandering around the Euro Gamer Expo at the ExCel Centre in London with my two boys, who are seven and nine, and my 14-year-old nephew. It was pretty cool, but way too crowded. We didn't get on any of the big releases, as the queues were awful, but we managed to play some decent indie games and buy some tat.

At one point we found ourselves in a decently sized retro section. I saw a BBC setup and sat down for a round of *Chuckie Egg*. My eldest thought it was pretty cool, and once I'd finished he asked if he could have a go. While he was playing, I got talking to a dad who was watching his daughter play something on a C64.

"Who'd have thought 35 years ago we'd be stood here, with our own kids playing this stuff?" I said. He grinned and nodded, and we both stood there like the proud parents we were.

When you're hanging out with kids of such varying ages, you have to be able to read the vibe, and I could tell my nephew wasn't really digging it.

"You not into retro games then?" I asked, knowing full well what the answer was going to be.

"Not really," he replied, looking as bored as hell.

Being the ace uncle I am, I promised not to keep him there too much longer, and said we could go and look at the *Fortnite* and Switch stuff straight after we'd had a little sweep around this area. I just wanted to see what was what.

As we were leaving, I couldn't believe my luck. Most of the machines had a couple of people hanging around, but right in front of me was a Dreamcast running *ChuChu Rocket!*. There were four controllers plugged in, and no one in sight.

"Guys, would you indulge me in this and then we can do whatever you want?"

Reluctantly, the three kids sat down with me and picked up the funny-shaped controllers. I could not remember what on earth you had to do, so I said, "Give me a minute to remember how to play this."

And here's the wonderful thing: they worked it out faster than me. And they absolutely loved it, all three of them. They destroyed me. It was so good that my nephew asked if we could stay for another game. And another. We had five in total, and I was thrashed in all of them. We shouted and screamed and called each other cheats, and it was bloody magic.

Since then I have been ordered to set up my DC on the big telly and get *ChuChu Rocket!* ready to play. I've had to buy more controllers, and the next time everyone is round I suspect we shall be indulging in one of the greatest and most insane multiplayer games of all time. Surely *CCR* deserves a reboot on a new console?

> "Who'd have thought 35 years ago we'd be stood here, with our own kids playing this stuff?"

Do you agree with Iain's thoughts? Contact us at:

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Who is Paul Rose?
Paul is probably better known as Mr Biffo – the creator of legendary teletext games magazine *Digitiser*. These days, he mostly writes his videogame ramblings over at Digitiser2000.com. If you want more Biffo in your eyes, you can catch him as the host of *Digitizer The Show* at www.bit.ly/biffo2000.

Keeping retro alive

There was a time, many years ago, when I was a young games journalist with the dampest of behind-the-ears spots, where I thought old games would stay in the past.

Retro gaming wasn't a thing back in the early Nineties when I first started peddling my words for coins. Perhaps, you could argue, the games we now consider retro were too fresh in the recent past to be viewed with any degree of nostalgia. We were faintly embarrassed by the likes of *Jack The Nipper* when we had *Resident Evil*.

I actually, at that point, believed that gaming was an ever forwards-moving medium – that games I'd played as a kid were so primitive, so crude-looking, that they wouldn't be remembered in the same way as, for example, classic albums. I remember thinking that was a bit sad, but also fair considering that I viewed early games as more like cavemen banging on a mammoth ribcage with a rock, rather than Electric Ladyland.

I mean, there were no way in 1994, say, to play a ZX Spectrum game on any of the current systems anyway. There wasn't, at that point, any obvious way to preserve old games digitally. More significantly, it didn't seem like anybody wanted to, so dazzled were we by new consoles, CD-ROM, and the lure of 3D gaming. I thought the past would remain buried, and deservedly so, for it was rubbish.

And then, at some point, the excitement that came with the dawn of the polygon age sort of wore off. It became the norm, rather than the big new thing, and it was around then that I started to grow wistful for the games of my youth. It might have been that more time had passed. It may have been that I grew up somewhat. Or maybe it was just the way the industry went – that we became aware that just because a game was on a CD-ROM, it didn't automatically equate to it being any good.

Either way, if it had been left up to Young Me – and others of my ilk – we'd have lost everything that came before, say, 1989. I'd have let it go, in my ignorance, those games living on only in memory.

Thank heck, then, for those with enough obsessive foresight to keep those early generations alive by preserving them in digital aspic. Thanks to them, I'm still playing the likes of *Pac-Man*, *Dragon's Lair*, *Underwurlde*, and *Skool Daze* decades on – the entire history of gaming at my fingertips, and we can see, now, that all of it had artistic and creative merit. Heck, some of it is just pretty damn good in its own right.

There's a lesson to be learned here. The past isn't just another country; it's in the fabric of the here and now. Without all that came before, we wouldn't have what we've got today, for better or worse. Dismissing something because it's old is for the young. Those of us with the benefit of wisdom know better.

Okay, boomers?

> "Perhaps, you could argue, the games we now consider retro were too fresh in the recent past to be viewed with any nostalgia"

Do you agree with Paul's thoughts? Contact us at:

RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com

PS4

4K HDR

PS4 Pro ENHANCED

A HIDEO KOJIMA GAME

DEATH STRANDING

TOMORROW IS IN YOUR HANDS

NOVEMBER 8

18
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PROVISIONAL

KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS
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Games output up to 2160p; PS4 Pro upscales lower resolutions to 2160p. HDR not supported by all games. 4K/HDR TV required for 4K and HDR. ©2019 Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC. Death Stranding is a trademark of Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC. Created and developed by Kojima Productions. "PlayStation" and "PS4" are registered trademarks of Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved.

RGC powers up

Robert Fletcher tells us about Retro Gaming Cables' new RAD2X HDMI range

If you're really interested in getting the best out of your classic consoles, odds are you've used leads by companies like Retro Gaming Cables. It's recently, teamed up with RetroTINK to create a new cable that allows you to easily play your older systems on modern HDMI-equipped televisions. RGC's Robert Fletcher goes into more detail.

When did you come up with the idea of the RAD2X?

In July 2018 when I saw the potential of the RetroTINK2x, a device for connecting retro consoles to modern flatscreen TVs via HDMI. The RetroTINK2x accepts inputs like composite and S-Video and converts these signals to HDMI. I'd been looking for a HDMI cable solution for a few years prior, however, the normal method of upscaling analogue video signals to HDMI causes a lot of issues and the RetroTINK2x resolved these.

How hard has it been to design?

This was one of the longest and most technical projects that I've worked on to date. After submitting an initial design overview to Mike we worked closely together on prototyping, which involved carrying out testing and directing Mike on amendments to the design and also liaising with the tool maker on the design of the case for the RAD2X.

» We prefer CRTs ourselves, but if you do have to play your retro systems on new TVs the RAD2X should help.

» Here's one of the RAD2X leads being made. A lot of work goes into their creation.

What separates the RAD2X lead from similar products?

The 240p signal from a console is interpreted correctly by the RAD2X whereby other all-in-one cable solutions do not. Instead they treat the signal as 480i resulting in a washed-out image with motion blur. No other cable on the market uses a line doubling method to achieve low latency, and our product is the only RGB-to-HDMI cable which incorporates a smoothing filter.

» Here's a couple of leads on the production line. Note the RGC branding.

Tell us a bit about your connection with RetroTINK.

I became aware of Mike Chi when Bob Neal at RetroRGB.com interviewed him back in 2018 showcasing the retroTINK2X. I became aware that this was just a sideline project for Mike as his main business was designing headsets to monitor brain activity!

Why are your leads limited to one per customer?

The leads are currently limited to one per customer since we have been running a preorder system. However, we hope to stock these in future for immediate purchase.

How have you managed to achieve such low latency?

The low latency is due to the inherent design of the RAD2X. It uses a line doubling method whereby only one line of information is processed at a time rather than one whole frame.

Why does the PlayStation version need an external power supply?

Unlike all other variations of the RAD2X the Playstation version of the RAD2X requires powering via a USB cable. This is because the PlayStation consoles cannot provide enough power from the AV Multi Out socket.

Why is a smoothing filter included?

As the smoothing feature was part of the original RetroTINK2X design, we decided to include this on the RAD2X for use on polygon games.

Do you plan to support any other systems outside of the ones you do already?

We have successfully tested the RAD2X on the Nintendo Wii, Original Xbox and Dreamcast. These systems are capable of outputting higher resolutions like 480p and above, however since the RAD2X can only accept the lower 240p/480i signals we decided not to sell dedicated RAD2X cables for those systems as it doesn't utilise them to their full potential. ✱

Head to **retrogamingcables.co.uk** for more information

PS4

4K HDR

PS4 Pro ENHANCED

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Games output up to 2160p; PS4 Pro upscales lower resolutions to 2160p. HDR not supported by all games. 4K/HDR TV required for 4K and HDR. ©2019 Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC. Death Stranding is a trademark of Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC. Created and developed by Kojima Productions. "PS", "PlayStation" and "PS4" are registered trademarks of Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved.

BACK TO THE NOUGHTIES

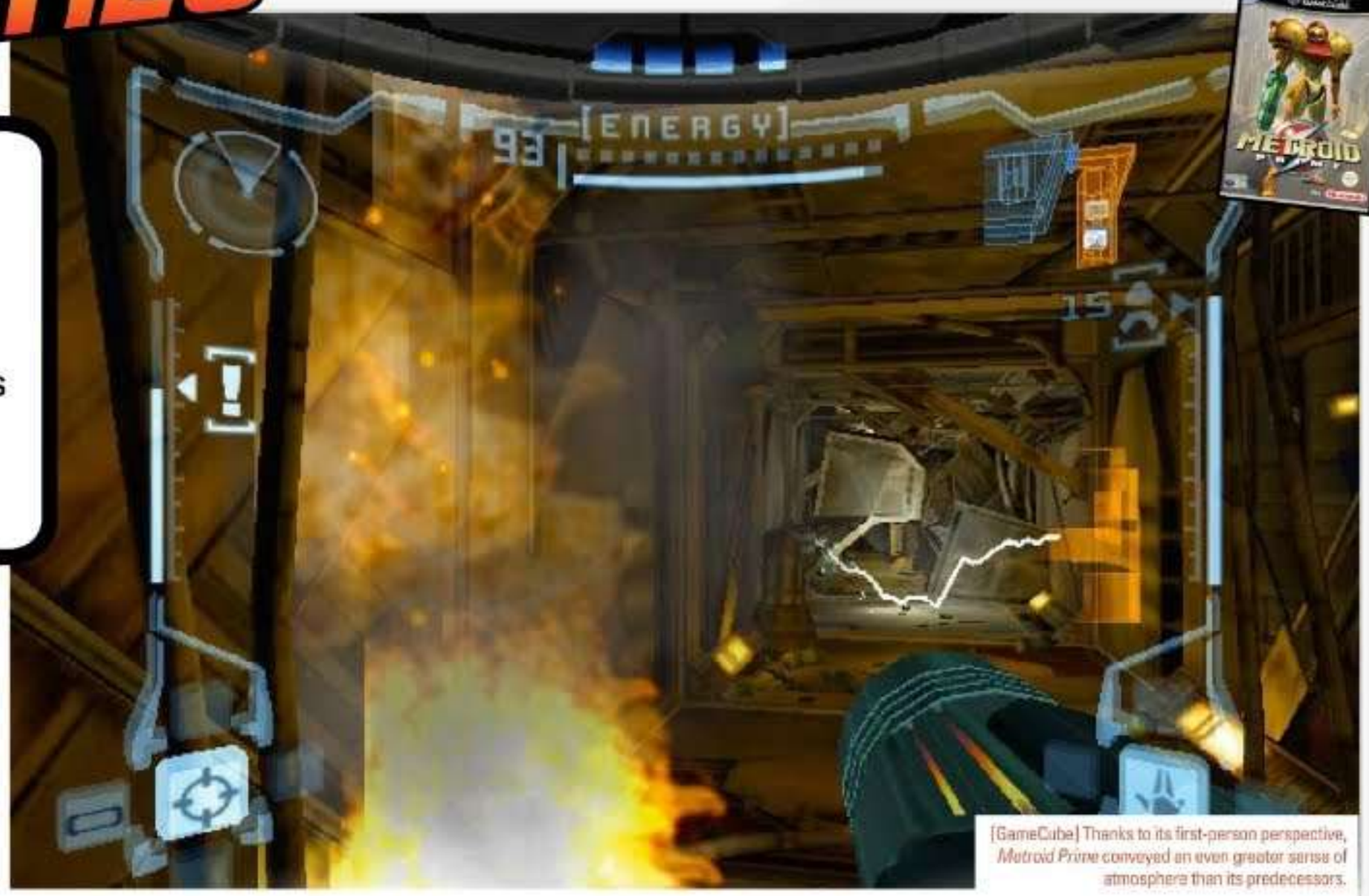
JANUARY 2003 – New Metroid games, the return of Shinobi, retro releases and even reviews of Neo Geo games! Stranded in 2003, Nick Thorpe wonders when we'll get a magazine dedicated to this kind of stuff…

NEWS JANUARY 2003

On 10 January, Ian Carr admitted causing the death of a six-year-old girl by dangerous driving, while driving a stolen car on New Year's Eve in Ashington, Northumberland. He had only been released from prison two months prior to the fatal crash, and the case drew media attention in the UK due to Carr's 89 previous convictions – including one for causing death by dangerous driving in 1990 – and two lifetime driving bans. On 31 January, he received a nine-and-a-half-year sentence for the crime, one of the longest ever handed out for this offence.

On 12 January, Maurice Gibb of the Bee Gees passed away suddenly at the age of 53, in Miami Beach, Florida. Gibb played bass and sang in the group, which became one of the world's best-selling musical acts thanks to hits such as *Stayin' Alive*, *Night Fever* and *How Deep Is Your Love*.

Internet traffic worldwide was significantly slowed by the SQL Slammer virus on 25 January. This barely hit home computers, but infected 75,000 computers – mostly servers, the majority of which were infected in ten minutes. The virus relied on poor IT security, as it used a buffer overflow exploit in Microsoft's widely used SQL Server database software that had been exposed and patched six months earlier.



[GameCube] Thanks to its first-person perspective, *Metroid Prime* conveyed an even greater sense of atmosphere than its predecessors.

THE LATEST NEWS FROM JANUARY 2003

After a troubled development at Retro Studios, the GameCube exclusive *Metroid Prime* finally emerged – and the first-person adventure received glowing reviews in its US import form. Samus' first adventure in over six years received a 10/10 score in *games™* – the first in the young magazine's history – with the reviewer praising it for feeling like *Super Metroid* and integrating series staples like the Morph Ball that "you'd never expect to work in a first-person game". *Edge*'s 9/10 review lauded the retention of player agency, noting that "although you're guided as to what your next move should be, you rarely pay immediate attention to this, choosing instead to embark on exploratory missions". *NGC* scored the game 96%, praising the graphics for displaying "more effects than we ever imagined the Cube was capable of".

With high-profile PAL releases thin on the ground, the US version of *Resident Evil 0* was another of the month's key GameCube releases. Set before the first game in the series, it paired Rebecca Chambers and fugitive Billy Coen on a journey towards the Spencer Mansion. *Edge* gave the game 7/10, and *NGC* scored it 86%, opining "while it's introduced an excellent new two-character system, it has eliminated very few of the increasingly obvious flaws that have haunted previous *Resident Evil* titles". Also arriving via the United States was *Sonic Mega Collection*, a compilation of Sonic's 16-bit adventures. This earned a surprisingly miserly 71% in *NGC* – though with revelations such as, "Kittsy was disgusted by the sight of it," and minus points like, "If you loath Sonic this will make you feel ill," it seemed as though the Nineties never ended.

Over on the Game Boy Advance, *Metroid Fusion* saw Samus being stalked by a deadly doppelganger known as the SA-X, and reprised *Super Metroid*'s 2D formula. The game scored very well, earning 92% from *NGC* and 8/10 from *Edge*. It also received 8/10 from *games™*, which noted the controversial addition of mission briefings. "Some hardcore *Metroid* fans will feel that they take away some of the skill needed to play the game," the reviewer conceded, "but they actually remove the need for the aimless wandering that the SNES game featured so heavily." It was a good month for retro gaming fanatics on Nintendo's handheld, too. FPS

[GBA] Though less revolutionary than its GameCube sibling, *Metroid Fusion* was still an excellent adventure.

[PS2] It wasn't the longest or prettiest game, but for all-out action few games could touch Sega's *Shinobi* revival.

[Neo Geo] Evoga's spiritual successor to *Double Dragon* was a good buy, for anyone with £300 to spend on one game.

sequel *Doom II* earned 82% from *NGC*, *Bubble Bobble Old & New* got 7/10 in *games™*, and *Game & Watch Gallery* scored 77% in NGC.

The PlayStation 2 was also host to a gaming comeback, thanks to Sega's reinvention of *Shinobi* as a 3D hack-and-slash. "While it may be short-lived, it's great fun while it lasts," opined *games™* in a 6/10 review. *Edge* was a tad more impressed, stating that the game's fast, combo-heavy action "affords players the opportunity to feel very, very cool", and awarding it 7/10. The heavily hyped cockney crime caper *The Getaway* scored 7/10 in *games™* and 6/10 in *Edge*. The latter said that the PS2 exclusive was "not the revolution we were promised" and "morally repugnant", but also an enjoyable game that "everyone wants to hate" – a position it felt unjustified. First-party effort *Sly Raccoon*, which blended cartoon platforming with stealth elements, received a similarly mild reception. Writing for the *Official PlayStation 2 Magazine*, Ryan Butt felt that it was an "enthralling and well-crafted game", but that there was "precious little here that hasn't been done before" and that the game's style "dupes you into believing you're playing something more original". *Edge* and *games™* each scored the game 6/10.

It was a quiet month for Xbox owners. Namco's multiplatform outing *Dead To Rights* earned 7/10 from *Edge* and 6/10 from *games™* based on the Xbox version. The latter magazine praised additions to the PAL version such as difficulty selection and improved balance, but complained that "too often problems with the camera or connection between characters makes it all feel cheaper than it should". *ToeJam & Earl III: Mission To Earth* earned 5/10 from *games™*, with strong characterisation failing to make up for a lack of "depth, variation and ingenuity". On PC, *SimCity 4* earned 8/10 from *games™*, which praised its quality but expressed frustration with a lack of evolution, stating that "there's little to demand repeated updates of what is essentially the same game".

So *Edge* was left to drag up interesting games on some of the less-celebrated formats. Sega's first (and last) original PlayStation game, *MiniMoni Shakka To Tambourine*,

[Xbox] Namco's high budget action game wasn't quite as polished as it should have been, but still offered some thrills.

scored 6/10. When judged against predecessor *Samba De Amigo*, *Edge* found the percussion-themed game to be "visually inferior, less instinctive, much worse aurally" but still "a wonderful party game". Also reviewed were two Neo Geo games, with the first being run-and-gun sequel *Metal Slug 4*. The game earned 7/10 for its "solid core gameplay" but *Edge* wasn't too pleased that "many of the innovations in the third game, such as multiple paths through levels [...] have been cut down or dropped completely". 2D fighter *Rage Of The Dragons* also earned 7/10, with the reviewer feeling that by implementing various innovative systems, "Evoga is teaching you new ways to play one of the most primal gaming genres."

Join us again next time as we chuck Nick back in time to February 2003. ✱

[PC] All this landfill and smoke would greatly displease Greta Thunborg, who was born in January 2003.

CHARTS

DECEMBER 2002

PLAYSTATION 2

1 – Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (Take 2)
2 – The Getaway (Sony)
3 – FIFA 2003 (EA)
4 – James Bond 007: Nightfire (EA)
5 – Lord Of The Rings: The Two Towers (EA)

XBOX

1 – Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell (Ubisoft)
2 – Halo: Combat Evolved (Microsoft)
3 – FIFA 2003 (EA)
4 – Medal Of Honor: Frontline (EA)
5 – James Bond 007: Nightfire (EA)

GAMECUBE

1 – Star Fox Adventures (Nintendo)
2 – Super Mario Sunshine (Nintendo)
3 – Mario Party 4 (Nintendo)
4 – James Bond 007: Nightfire (EA)
5 – FIFA 2003 (EA)

MUSIC

1 – Stop Living The Lie (David Sneddon))
2 – Year 3000 (Busted)
3 – Sound Of The Underground (Girls Aloud)
4 – True (Jaimeson ft Angel Blu)
5 – Mundian To Bach Ke (Punjabi MC)

THIS MONTH IN...

games™

This month's feature is a look into the world of gaming PR, including a handy translation guide. Describing his average day, Alex Verrey (AKA Big Boy Barry) lists activities including "join Her Majesty the Queen for a spot of tiffin, before boarding the Joytech helicopter for a rooftop meeting with *games™*", before adding "...then I wake up."

NGC

The main news story in *NGC* this month is Capcom's announcement of five brand-new GameCube exclusives – survival horror sequel *Resident Evil 4*, the futuristic shooter *PN03*, the inventive scrolling brawler *Viewtiful Joe*, the stylish but enigmatic *Killer7* and the action game *Dead Phoenix*. These could well be games to watch...

Edge

A report in this month's news tells of the formation of 3D AGES, a joint venture between Sega and budget game specialist D3 Publisher. The new company will produce remakes of classic Sega games for PS2, at ¥2,500 each. *Edge* speculates that *Fantasy Zone* may be based on the cancelled PC Engine game *Space Fantasy Zone*.

HELP

GAME

Shanghai

A NIGHT ON THE TILES

» RETROREVIVAL

» MASTER SYSTEM » 1988 » SEGA

Although it's well known that I'm a big fan of falling-block puzzle games, I'm pretty partial to just about any type of brain-teasing game. I loved a good game of *Pipe Dream* back when I was a kid, put more time than I reasonably should have done into *Zoop* and spent untold hours on *Hexic HD*, the brilliant freebie that came on my Xbox 360's hard disk. So as you can imagine, I was always interested in *Shanghai*, a Master System game that magazines had always told me was pretty great.

I never got *Shanghai* as a kid, but did end up trying various mahjong solitaire games a little later on – one on the Amiga, which I have sadly forgotten, and the Net Yaroze game *Mah Jongg* from a PlayStation demo disc. To my surprise, I totally bounced off them. I could work out that you were supposed to match the tiles, and it seemed obvious that you'd have to work from the outside, but I could never figure out why some matches were valid and others weren't. It wasn't until I decided to try playing again this year that I realised the problem – I didn't have instructions for either game. Once I realised that tiles have to have either their left or right edge completely free, and not be covered at all, I was well away. I ran through plenty of puzzles in a weekend. So now, after years of ignoring it, I suddenly want to play *Shanghai* again. I know it's not the slickest interpretation of mahjong solitaire out there these days, but it's a game I'd always wanted as a kid.

When I first started writing for **Retro Gamer** back in 2013, I thought I was done picking up Master System games – every game I didn't have was either not interesting or too expensive. But every so often I've had a lucky wild find, or ended up having to revise my opinion of a game I'd overlooked. I guess that's proof that no matter how well we think we know a favourite format, we can still find ourselves surprised. ★

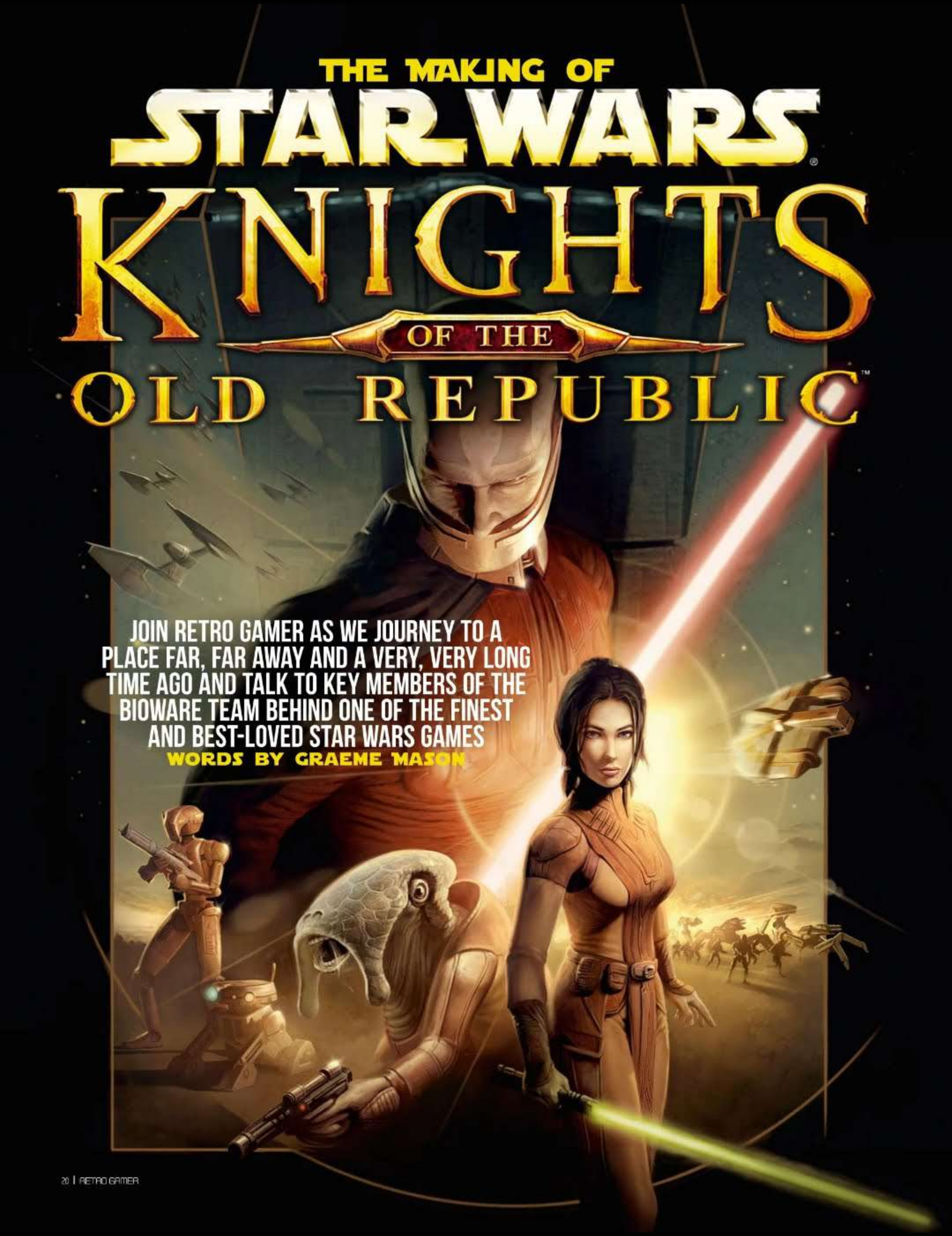
88

TILES

THE MAKING OF STAR WARS® KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC™

JOIN RETRO GAMER AS WE JOURNEY TO A PLACE FAR, FAR AWAY AND A VERY, VERY LONG TIME AGO AND TALK TO KEY MEMBERS OF THE BIOWARE TEAM BEHIND ONE OF THE FINEST AND BEST-LOVED STAR WARS GAMES

WORDS BY GRAEME MASON



IN THE KNOW

» **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS

» **DEVELOPER:** BIOWARE

» **RELEASED:** 2003

» **PLATFORM:** XBOX, VARIOUS

» **GENRE:** ROLE-PLAYING GAME

It is 4,000 years before the rise of the Empire, the birth of Luke Skywalker and the Rebel Alliance. Yet the Republic, a democratic mass of aligned systems and worlds, is on familiarly shaky ground as the forces of the Sith Lord Darth Malak plague the galaxy. Eager to assume despotic control of the many systems, Malak is waging war against the Republic and its guardians, the Jedi. *Knights Of The Old Republic* opens as his forces ambush the Republic space cruiser the Endar Spire, forcing the player, in a scene familiar to the beginning of *Star Wars: A New Hope*, to take flight via an escape pod, along with war hero and top pilot Carth Onasi. Beneath the stricken Endar Spire sits Taris, and it is here that the adventure, spanning several worlds, encompassing multiple missions and numerous colourful characters, begins with a search for a Jedi named Bastila Shan. Across some of the realms we already know and love, and employing a very *Star Wars* theme of dark versus light, this backdrop to *Knights* may appear conventional on first examination; yet underneath the patina is an RPG that expands the lore of the *Star Wars* universe while presenting a superb gaming experience that enraptured both fans and those new to George Lucas' legendary saga.

» [PC] Fan favourite HK-47. Do we detect a hint of sarcasm?

Long before Disney began to create its variably successful *Star Wars* spin-offs, videogames were spinning a whole world of sci-fi built around that galaxy far, far away. "We received a cold call from Simon Jeffrey, then director of development at LucasArts," remembers Greg Zeschuk, BioWare cofounder and executive producer on *Knights Of The Old Republic*. "He reached out to us to see if we would be interested in doing a *Star Wars* RPG, and it was a true cold call – we'd never met or even spoken to him before." BioWare was just beginning to wrap on *Neverwinter Nights*, an ambitious role-playing game that encompassed a brave new engine for its fantasy tale. "It was a great coincidence," continues Greg, "as we were in the process of selecting a next project. It was an easy decision for us and our team."

By 2000, BioWare was an exhilarating company to work for, having already forged a gigantic reputation in the RPG genre thanks to the marvellous *Baldur's Gate* and its sequel, *Shadows Of Amn*. But the developer had very real shadows of its own to contend with. "I'd say it was always turbulent, but those early days were pretty exciting as we were always doing new things and learning about the industry," Greg says. *Baldur's Gate's* spiritual follow up, *Neverwinter Nights*, became the most contentious project of BioWare's then

"HE REACHED OUT TO US TO SEE IF WE WOULD BE INTERESTED IN DOING A STAR WARS RPG, AND IT WAS A TRUE COLD CALL – WE'D NEVER MET OR EVEN SPOKEN TO HIM BEFORE"
GREG ZESCHUK

» Greg Zeschuk cofounded BioWare, and we speculate he could be an actual Jedi Knight.

» James Ohlen worked at BioWare for 22 years before starting Arcanum Worlds in 2018.

» Drew Karpyshyn worked on the story for *KOTOR*, and has written a number of *Star Wars* novels.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

BALDUR'S GATE
SYSTEM: PC , MAC
YEAR: 1998

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: PC, MAC
YEAR: 2002

SYSTEM: PC, XBOX 360, PLAYSTATION 3
YEAR: 2009

» [PC] It might be set way before the movies, but locations and characters still look unmistakenly *Star Wars*.

short history, mainly due to the technical boundaries the developer was trying to push, and the troubles at publishing partner Interplay. Spilling over into *Neverwinter*'s development schedule, a new publisher had to be found as work began on *Knights Of The Old Republic*. "From the beginning, BioWare was a multi-project company, so we were always working on balancing how to do multiple games at once," explains Greg. "There's always a finite amount of talent available, so we couldn't do them all full blast simultaneously." The core team of *Knights* would be constructed from a variety of sources, as the new scope warranted. *MDK2*, *Baldur's Gate II* and *Neverwinter Nights* personnel all combined to form *Knights*' squad, and as the *Neverwinter* development wound down, focus fully shifted to the *Star Wars* game, but not before creative lead James Ohlen and his team of writers and designers were sequestered to help get the fantasy RPG over the line.

Following that first initial contact with LucasArts, the first major decision was where, or rather when, to set the game. "We were given the option of setting it either between *Episode V* and *Episode VI*, or in the pre-history thousands of years before the movies," reveals Greg. "Understanding a bit about publisher and licensor management, as well as being given the opportunity to create some *Star Wars* canon, we chose 4,000 years before the movies, and were given a lot of latitude in what we created." A useful asset, and Greg smiles when we ask how far that latitude stretched. "The best comment from LucasArts in this context was: 'Just don't blow up any planets we'll need later.' Lead designer James Ohlen confirms the enthusiasm the team had for setting *Knights* long before Luke, Han and the rebellion. "The Old Republic era allowed us to tell a story where the fate of the galaxy was at stake, just as it was in the original trilogy of movies. One of my beliefs is that when working in other people's universes, it's important that you have the freedom to create

» [PC] This is not one of those *Star Wars* game without lightsabers.

» [PC] Who's that Hutt? Well... it's not Jabba.

"REMEMBER, THE LAUNCH TOOK PLACE IN THE DAYS WHERE CONSOLES WERE CONSIDERED THE FUTURE, SO WE THOUGHT IT WAS A BETTER BUSINESS DECISION TO DO LEAD ON CONSOLE"

GREG ZESCHUK

A GALAXY OF HEROES

THE PLAYER CAN RECRUIT SEVERAL CHARACTERS TO ACCOMPANY THEM ON THE EBON HAWK AND BEYOND. HERE'S WHAT TO EXPECT FROM EACH HERO

CANDEROUS ORDO

RACE: MANDALORIAN
HOME PLANET: ORDO

BIO: A veteran of the Mandalorian Wars, Canderous Ordo is first encountered on the planet Taris, plying his trade as a gangster's enforcer, before joining the player's team in order to find fame and excitement. An honourable warrior, he is a skilled fighter worth taking on the missions where you expect trouble (so most of them).

HK-47

RACE: ASSASSIN DROID
HOME PLANET: N/A

BIO: Constructed by Darth Revan with the sole purpose of assassinating key members of the Republic, HK-47 is one of *Knights*' more memorable characters, mercilessly eliminating its targets – which it calls 'meat bags'. Prone to killing its masters, HK-47 falls into your hands on Tatooine... erm, good luck.

CARTH ONASI

RACE: HUMAN
HOME PLANET: TELOS IV

BIO: An ace pilot and fighter with a roguish appearance, there's a little bit of Han Solo to this human. That's where the comparison ends, however, as Carth is a brave soldier of the Galactic Republic, meeting the protagonist on the Endar Spire before the pair elude Sith forces and escape to the nearby planet of Taris.

MISSION VAO

RACE: TWI'LEK
HOME PLANET: TARIS

BIO: The beautiful and cobalt orphan Mission is first met on Taris, at a bar called Jayvar's Cantina. Accompanied by a Wookie named Zaalbar, the pair provide intelligence and muscle to the player's mission before joining the team aboard the Ebon Hawk following the destruction of the doomed Taris via Sith bombardment.

» Early artwork demonstrates the scale and beauty BioWare was aiming for.

» [PC] You can't have Tatooine without Jawas and the nefarious, yet easily spooked Sand People.

stories as epic as what fans had experienced in other mediums." Drew Karpyshyn, a writer with extensive experience of the genre already thanks to his excellent work on *Baldur's Gate II*, its expansion *Throne Of Bhaal* and *Neverwinter Nights*, was predictably a busy man once more as development on *Knights* began in earnest, and the scope for new characters and stories ballooned. "The majority of my time went to the story, character and narrative side of things," he says. "We had a huge amount of dialogue – roughly the equivalent of 15-plus movies – so we were kept quite busy!"

Leaving the complex character depth and plot nuances aside for a moment, it's with Microsoft's Xbox that the story of *Knights Of The Republic* officially began. Eager to get a footing on platforms other than the PC, BioWare had already dabbled in console development with the Sega Dreamcast version of *MDK2*. "Initially we had PC and Xbox versions of *KOTOR* running neck and neck during development," recalls Greg. "But we elected to have the Xbox lead SKU. Remember, the launch took place in the days where consoles were considered the future, so we thought it was a better business decision to do lead on console." As BioWare lacked the staff and support to perform a simultaneous release, the focus was on the sturdy brick-like Xbox console. Along with Ray Muzyka, Greg liaised with *Knights*' project director Casey Hudson, bouncing ideas with him and the team, playtesting, reviewing progress and ensuring everything was tickety-boo as far as the mighty LucasArts was concerned. "Mike Gallo was our producer at LucasArts and he worked extensively with Casey; they always had a good idea of what we were doing," reveals Greg. "The fact we set the game outside the main movie storyline prevented too much detailed review of what we were building – I don't think LucasArts ever pulled rank on us for anything we built."

And what an epic build it turned out to be, from its dramatic beginning, Sith fighters buzzing around the tormented Republic starship, the Endar Spire, to the shocking destruction of Taris and the game's fateful and famous reveal regarding the player character. Along the way, friends will be made, and friendships will be betrayed, as the Dark side of the Force inveigles itself into every facet of the galaxy. But before that, there's the traditional element of character creation. In *Knights Of The Old Republic*, this represents a halfway point, in retrospect, between the complexities of *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter* and the smoothed-out process present in the *Mass* ▶

ZAALBAR

RACE: WOOKIE
HOME PLANET: KASHYYYK

BIO: A relatively young Wookiee, exiled from his homeworld of Kashyyyk following a disagreement with his brother, Zaalbar strikes up an odd friendship with Twi'lek Mission Vao on the planet Taris. Along with his friend, Zaalbar agrees to help the hero's search for the Star Forge and bring an end to the conflict.

BASTILA SHAN

RACE: HUMAN
HOME PLANET: TALRAVIN

BIO: Strong of character and honour, Bastila Shan also possesses a powerful Force power known as Battle Meditation, the ability to inspire colleagues while demoralizing enemies. Commander of the Endar Spire, Shan has a key role in the player's mission, with locating her on Taris the first main mission of the game.

T3-M4

RACE: UTILITY DROID
HOME PLANET: TARIS

BIO: Don't let T3's cute appearance fool you – an expert in computer slicing and manipulation, this little droid is a highly capable hacker, and is vital to the success of the player's mission. T3 leaves its home planet of Taris aboard the Ebon Hawk, thus escaping a life of wrong-doing for crime lord Davik Kang.

JUHANI

RACE: CATHAR
HOME PLANET: TARIS

BIO: Sylphlike and feline in appearance, Juhani often struggles to balance her devotion to the Force with the fierce nature endemic to all Cathars. Juhani joins the squad upon discovering the Star Map, and is notable for being the first openly gay character written specifically for the *Star Wars* universe.

JOLEE BINDO

RACE: HUMAN
HOME PLANET: KASHYYYK

BIO: Self-exiled on the planet of Kashyyyk after a ferocious battle with his wife Nayama who had fallen to the Dark side, Bindo is discovered during the game in the Shadowlands region. A touch too emotional to be a true Jedi warrior, Bindo becomes friends with the hero, and proves to be a valuable member of the Ebon Hawk team.

[PC] As is the case with BioWare games, a lot of the worldbuilding comes from conversations.

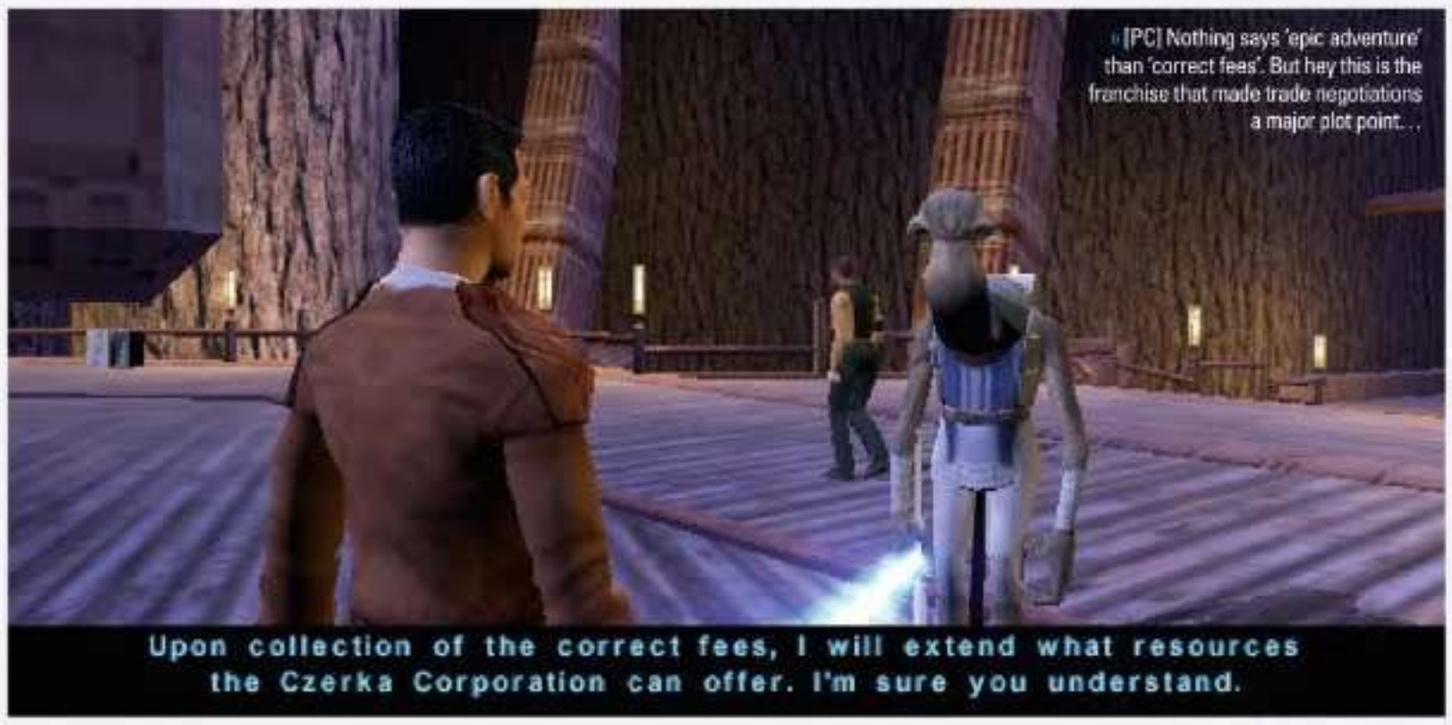
"WE DIDN'T WANT IT TO LOOK PRIMITIVE, BUT WE ALSO WANTED IT TO LOOK LESS REFINED THAN THE MODERN STAR WARS MOVIES. DEREK WATTS AND CASEY HAD THIS AS A HUGE TASK FOR THE FIRST FEW MONTHS OF DEVELOPMENT"
GREG ZESCHUK

Effect games. There are three basic classes, skills statistics and tiered feats, followed by Force powers that are unlocked once the player becomes a Jedi Padawan. And despite the popularity of *Baldur's Gate*'s Infinity engine, it was clear to BioWare that technology was moving on.

Knights would need a significantly different, more personal display, even if the combat was to remain lodged in the pause-action-unpause style of its previous games. "My memory is a little vague on this," Greg offers cautiously, "but if I recall correctly we initially tried to implement a real-time system, but soon realised it wasn't practical when managing your followers and your main character simultaneously. It took lots of tweaking to look visually good when running in real time, but also being able to give the player the ability to manage every single action. We went to 'pause-and-play' quickly, but it was still tricky!"

With art director Derek Watts, lead animator Steve Gilmour and programmer David Falkner rounding off the principal creatives, it was over to Drew Karpyshyn and his team of writers to get to work devising the hours of characterisation and plot that would rightly become the highlights of *Knights*. "We were excited by the idea of a galaxy with multiple Jedi and Sith at war, and also in exploring the way the Light and Dark sides of the Force came into conflict, or could even work together," Drew remembers. Each writer was responsible for certain characters, while Drew and James oversaw the process, ensuring the game contained a broad range of archetypes from both *Star Wars* lore and races as well as individual personality types. For the look of the game, the team settled on a mix of styles, acknowledging the timeline, yet attempting to weld a sense of familiarity to the setting. "The idea of how to depict an earlier version of the *Star Wars* universe was one of the trickier things we worked on for a quite a while," recalls Greg. "We didn't want it to look primitive, but we also wanted it to look less refined than the modern *Star Wars* movies. Derek Watts and Casey had this as a huge task for the first few months of development."

[PC] Nothing says 'epic adventure' than 'correct fees'. But hey this is the franchise that made trade negotiations a major plot point...


Upon collection of the correct fees, I will extend what resources the Czerka Corporation can offer. I'm sure you understand.

Yet it is *Knights Of The Old Republic*'s cast of eclectic characters, nine of whom can be recruited into the player's team, that most resonated with fans. From the conflicted Jedi Bastila, to weary veteran Jolee Bindo and Republic hero Carth Onasi, each character is so much more than a mere facade, with a latent backstory, motives and traits both positive and negative apparent in all. And as in all good *Star Wars* stories, the villain is both fearsome and pitiful. "Most of my focus was on Bastila, Mission Vao and Zaalbar," says Drew, the latter two an unlikely pairing of Twi'lek and Wookiee. "But I personally feel Malak was a great villain and – in the end – a somewhat tragic figure. I always enjoyed writing his scenes and dialogue." For many fans, the ruthless assassin droid, HK-47, remains a favourite. Dubbing all organic life as 'meat bags', the copper-coloured robot is an entertaining companion on missions, not to mention its excellent combative skills. "HK-47 is hilarious!" exclaims James Ohlen. "But Drew initially didn't think that Dave [Gaider, voice artist] and his take on the character were going to work. But when he sat in for the recording session, he realised what Dave was going for, and was pretty sure HK was going to be the most popular character in the game."

[PC] The villain of the piece, Darth Malak.

BioWare's collaborative style, encouraging discussions, but seldom disagreements, was to the fore with *Knights Of The Old Republic*. "While Drew would have come up with the overall story, he would have bounced it around with all the other writers and designers," notes Greg. "There is always a story owner, but also lots of good feedback to consider." That story arc would focus on the most traditional of *Star Wars* themes, the balance between the Light and Dark side of the Force, imbued within the player character at

A GALAXY TO SAVE

SOME FAMILIAR NAMES AND NEW LOCATIONS, THESE ARE THE KEY PLANETS YOU CAN VISIT IN KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

TATOOINE

■ This barren and harsh desert planet appears relatively unchanged from its frequent appearances in the *Star Wars* franchise, and is still infested by smugglers and pirates. Home to a somewhat bizarre Czerka Corp mining facility, this desolate world nevertheless contains one of the vital star maps.

DANTOOINE

■ Having escaped the destruction of Taris, the Ebon Hawk travels to Dantooine, home of the Jedi enclave. It's a green and rustic planet, and here the player must train in order to become a Padawan. There are numerous side quests and a Rakatan temple that reveals crucial information regarding the location of the Star Forge.

TARIS

■ Located in the Outer Rim territories, Taris is the dense ecumenopolis (city) planet that the player first arrives at following the Sith capture of the Endar Spire. Conquered by the Sith, Taris is placed under martial law and ultimately ravaged in a terrifying bombardment from which it takes decades to recover.

KASHYYYK

■ Kashyyyk is the home world of the Wookiees, a lush and verdant planet dotted with gargantuan trees. Here lies another star map and a whole bunch of walking carpets, some of whom don't take too kindly to an upstart Jedi and their mates rolling in. The Czerka Corporation are in force here, and you'll need to stump up 100 credits just for the honour of landing.

MANAAN

■ A primarily Ocean planet, Manaan is the home of an aquatic race known as the Selkath. A peaceful species, the Selkath manufacture and sell a healing plant to the Sith and Republic, both of whom have a base on the planet. An interesting set of locations, surrounded by sleek grey walls and the powerful crashing waters outside.

RAKATA PRIME

■ Given the mysterious nomenclature of 'Unknown World', Rakata Prime is the home of the ancient Rakata race. Technologically advanced, and deeply ensconced within the Dark side of the Force, the Rakata enslaved the galaxy during a reign known as the Infinite Empire. It is the location of the Star Forge, a powerful device that must be destroyed in order to save the present galaxy from a similar fate.

KORRIBAN

■ Infested with vicious Force-sensitive Terentateks and the home of the Sith, Korriban is a desolate and inhospitable planet that's unlikely to feature in any galaxy holiday brochures. The Sith Academy must be infiltrated by the player in order to discover the location of Korriban's Star Map, and given the level of opposition, it's a mission best left to last.

KOTOR: THE MOVIE

MIXED THOUGHTS FROM THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM ON A POSSIBLE CINEMATIC OUTING FOR THE OLD REPUBLIC

When *Buzzfeed* announced back in May 2019 that several sources had revealed a *Knights Of The Old Republic* script was in development, there was predictable excitement generated among fans. With Disney having scaled back its *Star Wars* spin-offs following the disappointing box office of *Solo*, the immediate appearance of a movie set 4,000 years before every cinematic outing so far seems unlikely. But what does the team behind the game make of the potential? "I think it would be great, but I don't think it should be modelled after the game, which has a story purposely derivative of the movies," says James. "One example of this is the showdown, which I ripped from the lightsaber duel at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*. People don't notice because they are the protagonist in an interactive game." Writer Drew Karpyshyn agrees. "It would be interesting to see, but honestly I don't know if it's a good idea. *Knights* was written as a game, and has too many characters and complexity for a movie, so huge chunks would end up getting cut." With much of the appeal of the game coming from its interactive nature and the role of the player within it, a game set 4,000 years in *Star Wars*' history would require a new plot and characters. "I think it would be cool," says Greg, "but I'm not really expecting anything. Many things are optioned for movies, but few are actually made."

» [PC] Arriving too late to save the crew of the Endar Spire.

a much higher level than they might at first suspect, which brings us neatly to *Knights Of The Old Republic*'s famous twist, a jaw-dropping moment that is preceded by a series of subtle hints that point towards the true origin of your very own character. For those who haven't played yet, beware, as here spoilers there are. "I liked the twist," remembers Drew, "but I knew it would all come down to execution and presentation. If you tell people a twist, it always sounds forced, clunky or blatantly obvious; the real trick is to give them a story that lays the groundwork for the twist, while also being entertaining on its own." The result, at least in *Knights*, feels natural yet surprising, instead of strained or incongruous, as the player is revealed to be Darth Revan, former ally of chief antagonist Darth Malak, memory-wiped by Bastila Shan, and now in the service of the Republic as a mere footsoldier. "The idea of the main character being the villain was something that came from a brainstorming session I had with Cam Tofer," recalls James. "The twist that ended up in the story was mostly me and Drew watching *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* and using them as templates for how to do that kind of twist." The former movie in particular taught BioWare the value of foreshadowing the abrupt turn of events, leaving enough clues so that alert and focused players could figure out what was happening, thus avoiding the revelation feeling like it had come out of the blue. "I was hyper-focused on that," notes Drew, "dropping these clues and lines in at various critical path junctures, then explicitly referring back to them during the actual moment when you discover your true identity."

> "I'M MORE A CONTENT DESIGNER THAN A GAME DESIGNER, SO I WANTED TO FOCUS ON THE CONTENT, RATHER THAN DEVELOPING A NEW GAMES SYSTEM. THEREFORE, USING NEVERWINTER AS A JUMPING OFF POINT MADE A LOT OF SENSE"
> **JAMES OHLEN**

With the game utilising *Neverwinter Nights*' Aurora engine – branched off and customized along with elements of *MDK2* – the technical development of *Knights Of The Old Republic* hit little more than the usual highs and lows of creating an ambitious videogame on relatively new hardware. "We had already developed choreographed combat in *Neverwinter Nights*, which was integral to getting across lightsaber duels," James recalls. "I'm more a content designer than a game designer, so I wanted to focus on the content, rather than developing a new games system. Therefore, using *Neverwinter* as a jumping off point made a lot of sense." As development began to march slowly, but steadily, towards the end straight, James focused on polishing the game via his own playtesting, internal testing and soliciting feedback from LucasArts. "I'm pretty sure I played *Knights* more than anyone else before it shipped," he jokes. "But I was really tired of the game by the time it was done." Meanwhile Drew Karpyshyn, having overseen the key intricacies of storyline and characterisation, tried to ensure inconsistencies were spotted as soon as possible in order to

» [Xbox] An early Jedi-Sith clash aboard the stricken Endar Spire.

[PC] The Ebon Hawk's design echoes a more famous 'hunk of junk'.

[PC] Preparing to slice up a Tusken Raider on Tatooine.

minimize any impact on development. But with a game the size, ambition and innovation of *Knights*, there were two notorious aspects of the industry that could not fail to rear their ugly heads: crunch and bugs. "Every BioWare games has thousands of bugs!" exclaims James. "And we always spend months squashing them." Stomping on digital insects aside, it was the nascent Microsoft hardware that often caused issues, specifically its CD drive, as Greg explains. "One of the main issues we faced – and one Microsoft was loathe to talk about – is that we streamed off the Xbox CD disc in real time, especially for the voices, and what we didn't know was that the Xbox didn't have consistent disc performance." Faced with troubleshooting the various issues, Microsoft revealed that they had used multiple models of disc drives within the console, some of them more reliable than others, leaving BioWare with little option but to plough on regardless.

And then there's the crunch. Drew Karpysyhn recalls in particular the rush towards the end of *Knights*' development. "BioWare crunch is almost always brutal," he laments. "Many people on the team put in months of 80-plus hour weeks, and towards the end some people were working 100-plus hours per week. We tried to limit it to six days per week, leaving at 9pm on weekdays and 6pm on Saturdays, with Sundays off. However, many people ignored those hours and worked overtime, including all of the senior people. In the final few weeks, I put in several 30-plus-hour

KNIGHTS OF THE MOBILE REPUBLIC

IS THE FORCE STRONG WITH THIS MOBILE CONVERSION?

By the miracle of modern technology, it is now possible to have the complete *Knights Of The Old Republic* experience on the go, thanks to Aspyr's excellent port for iPad, iPhone and Android. Given a sparkling sheen, the graphical lustre in particular shines on these devices, with the expanses of planets such as Tatooine and Manaan looking impressively lush and azure. Adapted for use with touch controls, the game also works well, with the player able to dart their squad around each world with ease, wielding lightsabers and blasters against the numerous enemies. Almost every other aspect of the original game survives intact, only now you can travel to the Sith Academy on Korriban while on the bus, or take on Darth Malak and his Sith horde while waiting at the dentist. Grounded with the same epic plot and characters, *KOTOR* mobile is a fantastic game for those looking to relive one of the finest *Star Wars* games, or to play it for the very first time.

THERE IS ANOTHER...

THE OLD REPUBLIC PAID HOST TO A COUPLE MORE GAMES

Following the success of *Knights Of The Old Republic*, BioWare was succeeded by Obsidian for the sequel *The Sith Lords*. Utilising the same engine, Odyssey, the game follows a new character known as 'The Exile', an exiled Jedi Knight at a time when the order has almost been wiped out by the evil Sith. While graphically similar, Obsidian made several tweaks to the style of gameplay pioneered by the first game, including a smoother party system and a large range of new Force powers. Once more relying heavily on characterisation, interaction and plot to drive the experience, the player's teammates can now be influenced directly by their actions. *The Sith Lords* was released in 2004 on Xbox, and early the following year on PC, to general high acclaim, despite criticisms that it was similar to the original. Work on a third single-player game began in 2004, but failed to proceed beyond early concept art, story, world and quest designs. Then, at 2008 E3, BioWare and LucasArts confirmed they were working on a long-rumoured MMORPG set in the Old Republic. Released in 2011, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* is set 300 years after the events of the first two games as another war threatens to consume the galaxy. Players are able to join either the Jedi or Sith, while offering a moral complexity beyond this binary choice. Phenomenally successful upon release, *The Old Republic* has since received several expansions and seen a move from subscription to a free-to-play model – and it still operates today, making it an ideal way to dip back into this mysterious and fascinating era of the *Star Wars* franchise.

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC: THE TRIVIA FILE

FIVE MORE SNIPPETS OF INFORMATION, FRESH FROM THE COMPUTER BANKS OF THE EBON HAWK

1 GameCube and PlayStation 2 versions were never considered, due to Microsoft exclusivity.

2 An early idea was to have the player be a clone of Revan, before LucasArts told BioWare that clone stories were off the table. A few months later the next film, *Attack Of The Clones*, was announced.

3 Just before LucasArts contacted BioWare, James Ohlen and Ray Muzyka were mulling over a licence of a relatively unknown book at the time called *A Game Of Thrones*.

4 Members *of KOTOR*'s cast appeared in BioWare's *Mass Effect* – notably Jennifer Hale (Bastilla) and Raphael Sbarge (Carth).

5 Many of *KOTOR*'s characters came from James Ohlen's childhood *Star Wars* tabletop campaign by West End Games.

[PC] Here we are exploring the prestigious Starfleet Academy.

[PC] Familiar locations appear in *Knights*, such as the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk (bless you).

shifts as we scrambled to get it approved for the gold [master] disk." While not quite as grave, James acknowledges the urgency to finish off *Knights* was critical towards the end. "There was crunch, but we got the game done before summer, so it wasn't too bad. But if we had pushed into summer, I think most of us would have lost our minds." Nevertheless, in a mighty fine videogame that had its development stretched right to the very limit, James still harbours some regrets. "It would have been great to get more of the epic battles that are so important to why *Star Wars* is awesome – the 'wars' part is so integral to the franchise," he notes. Despite the wonderful depth to *Knights*, it's hard to disagree given most fans fell in love and were mesmerised by imposing Star Destroyers, waspish X-wing fighters and the gangling, ponderous AT-ATs of *The Empire Strikes Back*. It's a somewhat harsh analysis, not shared by Greg, or Drew. "Considering it was one of BioWare's biggest hits, won multiple Game Of The Year awards and is still beloved by millions, I don't think I can have any regrets," says the latter.

> "THERE WAS CRUNCH, BUT WE GOT THE GAME DONE BEFORE SUMMER, SO IT WASN'T TOO BAD. BUT IF WE HAD PUSHED INTO SUMMER, I THINK MOST OF US WOULD HAVE LOST OUR MINDS"
> **JAMES OHLEN**

Upon release, *Knights Of The Old Republic* was indeed a worldwide smash hit, and a pleasant surprise to many fans jaded by the prequel trilogy episodes *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack Of The Clones*. And it proved a relief, albeit a temporary one, at BioWare. "We didn't really have time to sit back and enjoy [the success]," says Drew. "By then, we were already dealing with the next crisis, whether it be *Neverwinter Nights II*,

» [PC] Combat took cues from *the D&D* system found in BioWare's previous RPGs.

We are the Outcasts - shunned from the surface for our crimes and banished here to the Undercity. We banded together to form this village that we might survive in this hostile environment.

» [PC] BioWare had the creative freedom to create its own remarkable slice of the *Star Wars* universe.

Jade Empire, Dragon Age – we had a lot going on." While James admits he "had no idea how people were going to react to it", executive producer Greg, also cofounder of the renowned developer, says, "I'm proud of all our games – it's difficult to even release a game, so to have made a number of beloved games that were also commercially successful is a pretty shocking thing. And I think without doubt that *Knights Of The Old Republic* is one of our best, and certainly the right game at the right time." With *Knights* a triumph, LucasArts' thoughts turned inevitably to a sequel, although sadly the continuing storyline was not taken up by BioWare. "They [LucasArts] wanted a tight timeline for the sequel, and we didn't feel we could deliver what we wanted within that timeframe," says Greg. "What we did do, was connect them to the folks at Obsidian and ensure that the process went smoothly, so there was another game in the series for fans to play." Set five years after the events of the first game, *The Sith Lords* sees the vengeful Sith tighten its grip on the galaxy, while introducing several new elements such as fresh Force powers and more interactive team characters. Packaged up in a familiar engine, it's a sincere case of more of the same, yet neatly wrapped the story, and while not in the league of the original's sales figures, was another hit nonetheless.

It was that original that transformed RPGs, from the nerdy trappings of the *Baldur's Gate* games to modern, impressive graphics, migrated away from the traditional PC home of the genre. "I think it's a great game, and it had a huge impact on BioWare and the CRPG industry as a whole," Drew notes. "Yes, the graphics may be a bit dated now, but the story still stands up today." The combination of the *Star Wars* IP, story, characterisation and the epic sweep that BioWare infused into *Knights* has made it the classic it is quite rightly regarded as over 15 years later. "*KOTOR* influenced what I wanted to do with *Dragon Age*, and also led to *Star Wars: The Old Republic*," concludes James Ohlen. "And I'm so very proud of it. My son is a big *Star Wars* fan, so it's great that it's so highly regarded by so many fans of *Star Wars*." For Drew Karpyshyn, his work on *Knights* led to a career that has encompassed original sci-fi epics *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*, the influence on which can be clearly seen. "It also helped land me my first *Star Wars* novel, *Darth Bane: Path Of Destruction*," he says, "so it really helped to kick my writing career to another level. I'll always have a soft spot in my heart for *Knights Of The Old Republic*."

Whether you choose the Light side or the Dark, *Knights Of the Old Republic* remains a hell of an adventure, full of beautiful worlds, brave heroes, dastardly villains and heart-breaking betrayal. "Our goal was always to deliver a great game," smiles Greg Zeschuk. "And sometimes that takes a little longer than expected. But if you do something amazing in the end, it's always worth it."

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THE MAKING OF BACTRON

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

After finding success with 3D football and shoot-'em-up titles, Vincent Baillet decided to tap into the trend for isometric adventure games. The developer reveals how he added something unique to the genre with the biology-themed Bactron

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** LORICIELS
- **DEVELOPER:** VINCENT BAILLET
- **RELEASED:** 1986
- **PLATFORM:** AMSTRAD CPC, THOMSON
- **GENRE:** PUZZLER

» (Amstrad CPC) There are 11 yellow enzymes to activate in *Bactron*; the blue ones are hostile variants.

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

MACH 3
SYSTEM: ATARI ST, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1987

TURBO CUP (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: ATARI ST, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1988

WEST PHASER
SYSTEM: ATARI ST, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1989

» (Amstrad CPC) *Bactron*'s penultimate level has multiple exits, and you won't have time to take the wrong one.

Although Sandy White's *Ant Attack* came out earlier, it wasn't until Ultimate released its seminal Spectrum classic *Knight Lore* towards the end of 1984 that the isometric adventure genre took off, and it took another year for the 3D format to be adapted for the Amstrad CPC's low-res 16-colour mode. The credit for this second achievement went to designer Rémi Herbulot, who topped the Amstrad charts with the surreal and innovative *Get Dexter*.

By this point, fellow French developer Vincent Baillet had devised a forced-perspective football title called *Foot* and an into-the-screen shoot-'em-up named *3D Fight*, and so he felt confident of creating an isometric adventure of his own. Vincent remembers that his first step was to do some research. "There were some pretty good games at that time that used isometric graphics," he notes. "One of my references was *Get Dexter*, of course, but I'd also broken several joysticks on *Marble Madness*, *Spindizzy* and others! So let's say that it was the global trend at that time to work on isometric games, as isometric graphics were a simple way to render a 3D world."

Having assessed the competition, Vincent next looked for a theme for his game – which he subsequently called *Bactron* – when news of a forthcoming movie pointed him in a very different direction from the isometric project being devised by the developer he shared a desk with. "There was a movie called *Innerspace* that was planned for release," Vincent recollects. "I think the idea for *Bactron* – where there was a tiny world inside a body – came from that movie. At

TREATING BACTRON

THE FIVE-STAGE CURE FOR THE GAME'S VIRUSES

CONTROL ISSUES

The controls in *Bactron* differ from those in other isometric games in that you walk backwards when you head in the opposite direction of the one that you're facing. With this in mind, it makes sense to get used to the controls in an opponent-free room before tackling the rest of the game.

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

Bactron's orbs-on-plinths drain your energy on contact, but they're motionless, and its blue enzymes are harmless if left inactivated. The game's double orbs and spinning tops are slow and easily avoidable, but its skulls and pumps are far faster, and freezing them is often the only option.

ENZYME EXPEDITION

Due to *Bactron*'s time limit, triggering the game's 11 yellow enzymes before its patient dies is impossible without knowing their locations. The enzymes are always in the same places, however, so you can map them out over successive tries and then take the shortest route between them.

PUZZLE PRACTICE

Once you've mapped out all of *Bactron*'s enzymes, you need to practice the puzzles in the stages between them so that you can overcome them quickly enough to beat the clock. Once you've nailed them, you need to rapidly pull them all off one after another, but even then, every second counts.

FINAL TWIST

Bactron has four rooms situated as far from its starting locations as possible, and once you've entered this block it can't be exited. That said, one room contains an enzyme, which makes the stages unavoidable, but it's vital to avoid them until after you've activated the other ten enzymes.

» [Amstrad CPC] You can rush past viruses that are guarding exits in *Bactron* once you've lured them away.

» [Amstrad CPC] Triggering *Bactron*'s final enzyme restarts the game with a stricter time limit to complete your mission.

» [Amstrad CPC] *Bactron*'s viruses aren't great at avoiding obstacles, and they sometimes get trapped behind them.

the same time, Loriciel was also developing *MGT – Magnetik Tank*. It was done at the same time as *Bactron* with the same tools on the same office desk. *MGT*'s action took place on a *huge* world, but those two games were cousins, although they were opposite in many ways."

Not only was Vincent's design for *Bactron* quite distinct from *MGT*, it also differed from the game that defined 16-colour isometric gaming – Rémi Herbulot's *Get Dexter*, in as much as *Bactron* wouldn't involve jumping onto and over things, or managing a sidekick. "*Get Dexter* featured several innovations," Vincent acknowledges, "you had Scooter, and you could even jump on a bed and break it! But *Bactron* had to go in another direction, even though *Get Dexter* was a real inspiration. At the time, that game was fantastic, but the goal was not to copy it. It was the competition to some extent, and *Bactron* ended up being really different. You had to surprise players, and give them a new experience for every new game. Also, if Bactron had been able to jump it would have completely changed its gameplay."

> "I wanted some diversity in the levels, so some rooms had puzzles, some had mazes, some were big and some were small"
> Vincent Baillet

In keeping with *Get Dexter*, however, Vincent created rooms for *Bactron* that contained logistical puzzles, although he contrasted these designs with levels based around mazes, and he varied the size and shape of each of his game's stages. "I wanted some diversity in the levels," Vincent reflects, "so some rooms had puzzles, some had mazes, some were big and some were small. That way, each room you went into was a new surprise. We didn't have 'game design documents' at that time, nor did we have a clear creative process. If we had a good idea, we just tried to implement it. We didn't spend much time on a project, so we had to find simple ways to entertain players, and the mazes were just a simple way to add difficulty, with not much code to write."

Another simple method of increasing *Bactron*'s challenge followed, as Vincent took the innovative step of allowing his game's hero to pull – as well as push – obstacles and objects around, and when he noticed that it was possible to get trapped during the process he viewed it as a feature rather than a bug. "Every game comes with a bit of innovation," Vincent says modestly. "If I allowed Bactron to push and pull objects, it was probably just because it was fun to program it, and fun to play with that feature. Yes, Bactron could get blocked if the player failed. But that's life, and so if they didn't do a great job then they were punished, and they would take more care next time. Stuck players would just restart the game. It seems strange now, but I think it was normal then."

» Vincent Baillet teaches games design and culture, and consults within the videogames industry and beyond.

Of course, moving things around, navigating mazes ▶

BEST BACTRON

AMSTRAD CPC VS THOMSON

AMSTRAD CPC

As well as looking fantastic, the Amstrad original makes excellent use of the system's sound chip. This is used to deliver arcade-style in-game sound effects and a rousing pregame tune, the latter of which is played out over an animated introduction of the game's hero and his opponents. This is followed by static teasers of the game's maze-laden, obstacle-strewn stages that show you which viruses they're infected by before you tackle their isometric puzzles.

THOMSON

The Thomson *Bactron* drops you in-game as soon as it loads; there's no scene-setting music, introduction of its cast or preview of its levels. Its sound effects are decent, but not as good as those in the Amstrad original. Graphically, the Thomson conversion is nigh-identical to its inspiration, except for some visuals being blue rather than purple. But more importantly, the Thomson port perfectly replicates its Amstrad CPC counterpart's superlative isometric gameplay.

» [Amstrad CPC] Bactron's natural defence takes the form of spit that temporarily freezes his foes to the spot.

» [Amstrad CPC] Due to *Bactron*'s strict time limit, once you finish a stage you need to beat a hasty retreat.

▶ and solving puzzles only added so much gameplay, and so Vincent entrusted his artist Bruno Masson with designing some eclectic opponents for his titular protagonist Bactron to go up against. "Bactron was a virus killer, and his enemies were viruses, so it was obvious they didn't have to have the same appearance," Vincent reasons. "Bruno Masson just proposed the characters, and they were so nice that we said yes to everything he did. We didn't have an 'artistic direction', so there were probably some inconsistencies in terms of gameplay and graphics, but we just wanted to have a fun-looking game. And everything Bruno did on this project was fun and beautiful."

But once he had coded these viruses into his game, Vincent felt that his hero required some form of defence, and the designer concluded that the most appropriate weapon for a bacteria to have was a mouthful of healing fluids that could be spat over nearby opponents. "I'm not sure it was unhygienic," Vincent argues, "since Bactron was spitting a very powerful chemical mix, a kind of super medicine, and you could see the radical effects it had on the viruses. Anyway, Bactron didn't have arms or hands, so he couldn't handle a Kalashnikov or a Laser! The only way for him to attack was by using his mouth."

As well as giving him a useful – if antisocial – attack mechanism, Vincent also gave his player character a core objective of triggering yellow enzymes to treat *Bactron*'s viruses, although this wouldn't actually be shown in-game. "That's a good idea! But we didn't think about it at that time," Vincent says of depicting the viruses in his game being attacked by enzymes. "Unfortunately, Loriciel will not be releasing an update! It would not have been complicated to do so, but I'm not sure it would have improved the game much. It would just have been a detail to give a little more coherence to the story. *Bactron* could have been improved in many ways, but we had to care about the budget, so when we released a game, we had hundreds of new ideas to improve it but no time to do so."

One idea that Vincent did find time for was to introduce harmful blue enzymes into his latest project, the danger of which was left for players to discover. "I suppose that the blue enzymes were just

» [Amstrad CPC] The more ambitious level designs in *Bactron* combine confined spaces with determined opponents to great effect.

» [Amstrad CPC] Despite their homing instincts, the viruses in *Bactron* get confused when you hide behind obstacles.

» [Amstrad CPC] Isometric maze-like barriers populated by lethal viruses are a staple of *Bactron*'s level designs.

"Bactron didn't have arms or hands, so he couldn't handle a Kalashnikov or a Laser! The only way for him to attack was by using his mouth"
Vincent Baillet

» [Amstrad CPC] Some of *Bactron*'s stages are so littered with objects that they feel like obstacle courses.

» [Amstrad CPC] Bactron's titular hero makes a mad dash from a nasty virus on the game's opening stage.

an economical way to get a new enemy without much work," Vincent admits, before adding, "Let's say that they were just a prank! The player would think that it was okay to touch the blue enzymes, but when he did so he soon discovered that he would have to avoid them the next time."

A second pitfall awaited players at the very end of Vincent's game, as the developer designed *Bactron*'s final four stages to be inescapable once entered, regardless of if all of the enzymes required to complete the game had been activated or not. "Well, all of those games were about trial and error," Vincent points out. "I don't actually remember that specific feature, but it looks like it was intentional, and that it was a kind of trap. That wasn't very fair for the player, but players were a lot more forgiving and patient then than they are now."

But as if to underline the challenging nature of games made in the Eighties, Vincent gave *Bactron* a second twist by sending players who completed his game back to the start. "A lot of the games at that time didn't have an ending," Vincent recalls. "It was probably because of projects being late, and that Christmas was coming and you had to hurry to release something. In *Bactron*'s case, we spent 0% of the budget on this, as we thought it was a useless feature, but *Bactron* was the last game I did without an ending."

Due to the expectations of the time, the unforgiving aspects of *Bactron* largely went unnoticed on the game's release, and its visuals and novel gameplay guaranteed strong sales and solid reviews. "I think the sales were quite high for *Bactron*," Vincent recollects. "It wasn't what you would call a triple-A game now, but at that time it was a success. I saw some reviews that were quite good in France, and I saw a review in an English magazine that was so-so, but maybe English journalists were more serious than French ones! Anyway, when a game was finished, we just started another one and stopped thinking about the previous release."

But decades later, Vincent is happy to give some more thought to his innovative adventure, and feels that with hindsight he would make some changes. "As a game designer, I would certainly change lots of things," Vincent considers. "The gameplay needs a complete refurbishment. I would add more puzzles and more rooms, and I would add surprises, I would put in more rewards and design an ending. It was probably a mistake not to spend time on that, but it was a mistake that had no consequences 30 or so years ago!"

Revisions aside, however, Vincent looks back at *Bactron* with understandable pride, and concludes that his challenging isometric title is of its time and still stands up well, even decades after its release. "I've spent some time watching videos about *Bactron*, and frankly, I'm proud to have created this game," Vincent beams. "It's probably not the best gameplay, but technically and graphically the quality is quite good for those old computers, and the concept is rather original. The game designer now contributes the most important aspect of a game, but in the Eighties the programmers had all the power, and *Bactron* is a programmer's game. It's certainly not perfect, but it's good enough that we're discussing it 34 years after its release." ✱

PSYCHO PIGS UXB

INFO

» ARCADE RELEASE: 1987

» ZX SPECTRUM RELEASE: 1988

» CONVERSION TEAM: STE CORK

» AVERAGE SCORE: 69%

This odd release started life in the arcade under the name Butasan – a game which involved pigs blowing one another up with bombs. How could this not be a hit? Retro Gamer speaks to programmer Ste Cork on his conversion of the game to the ZX Spectrum

Words by Paul Davies

Having created the cult classic *Rescue* for the ZX Spectrum and the well-respected *Colony*, both for Icon Design, Ste Cork had built a reputation for producing great games. When the time came for him to move to pastures new, this time working for Software Creations, a new challenge was put before him. Now, an arcade conversion can be an exciting prospect – but that can depend on the game. It's fair to say that Ste Cork was a little underwhelmed with the conversion job that landed at his feet at his new workplace. "When I arrived I immediately got given *Psycho Pigs UXB* to work on – though this was because no one else wanted to do it and I was the new guy, I drew the short straw," he explains. So not a great start to this conversion journey, and it seems that Software Creations wasn't that keen to take it on in the first place – so why was the studio converting the game at all? "Apparently they had to take this game and convert it to the home computers as it was a prerequisite for Software Creations to get the *Bionic Commando* licence," Ste explains. So with a game to convert that neither the software company nor any of its programmers were really that interested in, it was down to Ste to be a professional and get on with the job in hand.

« [ZX Spectrum] Look how cute those pigs are!

With what seemed like a project that was more a necessity than fun, how did Ste go about motivating himself to make a good job of it? Playing the game must have been a good start, did seeing it in the flesh first-hand inspire him and make the task enjoyable? "God no," he replies. "I'd never seen it before, and after encountering the arcade machine I still wasn't a fan. I remember thinking 'only in Japan...' when I saw it." Despite not falling in love with the game, Ste's a professional, and if you've a job to do, you have to get on with it – fan or not.

So how did he get on with starting the conversion? An arcade cabinet setup with the game would be a start at least. "We had a JAMMA board of the game, running with what you could describe as 'questionable' English. Think 'All Your Base Are Belong To Us' and you get the idea," Ste explains. "That's it really, in terms of help. Unfortunately, we only had one JAMMA-compatible cabinet, and I had to constantly keep swapping out the board with the other project being worked on, which got tedious." All of these factors combined didn't really have the foundations of making the conversion operation as smooth as it could be, but Ste had to get on with it.

« [ZX Spectrum] It's not vibrant like the arcade game, but it is chaotic.

Assessing the original arcade game gave Ste the chance to think about how this could work on the Spectrum. With the obvious and most likely issue to be colour given the Spectrum's limitations in that area, it was down to Ste to think his way around this problem. "Considering it [the arcade original] had large colourful characters moving around the screen and over the top of each other, it was obvious it was going to lose a lot of colour in its conversion to the Spectrum. Attribute clash on that scale would be unforgivable, and you couldn't make the characters walk around each other. So the first thing that had to go was the colour. Once you've lost all that, all that's left is moving some sprites around, which is a no-brainer." Luckily for Ste, the colour clash issue seemed to be the only major bugbear for the conversion in terms of keeping it graphically as close to the original as possible. He was able to retain the majority of the original features of the arcade game, too, including the in-game music. "Once you took out the colours, there wasn't much left to be a problem so I don't recall taking anything else out," Ste remembers. "We did at least get to use the Spectrum 128's AY chip, so there was sound and music being played, or at least as good as the AY chip could do."

That's not to say there were no other problems, as another issue for the Spectrum version would be a strong emphasis on green backgrounds. The original *Psycho Pigs UXB*'s backgrounds were coloured in green hues, as it was set on a grass playing field, which led to a problem in terms of how it was displayed on a television. CRT sets – which were a staple of the Eighties – and the Spectrum did not really get on with each other, as Ste highlights. "Green is one of the colours that 'crawl' on a Spectrum game when viewed on a TV, so we knew it was going to look like crap right from the start. Not very inspiring, considering this was going to be a very prominent colour within the game."

In a project that seemed full of negatives, was there anything about this conversion that would lift the spirits? Was there

» [ZX Spectrum] So many bombs, so little time.

» [ZX Spectrum] You've lost. Badly. Time for another try.

anything Ste was a fan of? "The only things I enjoyed at all were keeping some of the Japanese-English phrasing to retain at least a little charm," he recalls. "Also, I managed to sneak in some bits. I think the main one was that in the demo mode with the pigs running around, there's one point where they all run vertically up the screen, but one of them stays behind for a short time, drops down on one knee facing out of the screen at you, then middle-fingers the player before running off to join the rest of them. That still amuses me, but I think it only managed to stay in because with the graphics quality of the pigs it's not easy to make out. Once seen though, it can never be unseen." So that's something to look out for the next time you play it, and finally something to smile about for Mr Cork.

With the conversion now in the bag after what was the end of a less than enjoyable job, surely completing his task would leave Ste happy in some way. How did he feel about the finished article? Proud? Happy? Erm… well, we'll let Ste field this one. "Sorry, but I hated it. I wasn't proud at all. The original game was no fun in my opinion, and whatever charm it might have had got completely lost by being turned into a mostly mono game on plain backgrounds often with hideous colour crawl. I was glad to be done with it, honestly. Not my finest hour, but you did what you were paid to do and it was always possible someone liked it." ✱

HOW ACCURATE IS IT?

Bonus levels
■ Despite the gap in memory, the Spectrum version managed to keep hold of the bonus levels found in the original.

No pink piggies
■ As with a lot of Spectrum games, colour was sacrificed to avoid clash. Imagine the mess!

Level playing field
■ The only major sacrifice here are the game colours, all the original arcade levels are here to be enjoyed.

A sound conversion
■ Spectrum 128 owners were treated to some menu and in-game music to keep their ears entertained.

Introducing…
■ Even the little extras managed to make the Spectrum cut – this time we mean the pig introductions, which are a nice touch.

Ultimate Guide: Twin Cobra

If you're a fan of Japanese shooters you'll know all about Toaplan, and if you know Toaplan then Twin Cobra needs no introduction. So how about we skip the formalities?

Words by Martyn Carroll

» The striking artwork created for the Japanese Mega Drive version.

» Romstar licensed the game from Taito for distribution in North America.

You'd likely find *Twin Cobra* at the back of the arcade, hidden from the area where the flashy showstoppers from Sega, Konami and Namco drew crowds. Here in the gloom you would typically find rows of generic stand-up cabs housing games that offered cheap thrills. This was the domain of second-tier developers like Tecmo, Irem and Toaplan.

Toaplan was founded in Japan in 1984 and quickly established itself as a purveyor of vertically scrolling shooters thanks to games like *Tiger Heli* and *Slap Fight* (aka Alcon). Both titles were published by Taito and achieved success in arcades, but it was the firm's 1987 game *Flying Shark* (aka *Sky Shark*) that cemented its reputation as master blasters. *Twin Cobra* followed later the same year, and while it was presented as a sequel to *Tiger Heli*, it was built on the blueprint of *Flying Shark*. Indeed, at first glance you can argue that it's simply *Flying Shark* with the biplanes swapped out for helicopters.

The games run on the same 68000 setup, so they're visually alike (although the enemy sprites and shots in *Twin Cobra* are better defined against the background, making it slightly fairer). Both games also utilise a vertically mounted 19-inch monitor displaying a resolution of 320x240 pixels, with a horizontal scroll used to display the full 320x320 pixel playfield. *Twin Cobra* has ten stages, twice as many as *Flying Shark*, although more doesn't mean different, as they're the usual mix of enemy towns, airfields, docks and whatnot. Both games also feature end-of-stage 'bosses' which are nondescript, bullet-spewing hunks of metal that you can engage or, in most cases, ignore.

Where *Twin Cobra* differs is in its weaponry, which has more in common with the futuristic arsenal seen in *Slap Fight*. Toaplan's trademark ▶

EXTRA LIFE

▶ smart bomb is featured, and your main weapon can be upgraded by collecting the 'S' icons that enemies drop, as per *Flying Shark*, but the game actually features four main weapons. Some enemies will release a glowing orb which cycles through four different colours, and the colour relates to a weapon. This means you can chop and change your weapon during play, selecting the best one to deal with different scenarios (the blue weapon is brilliant for wide coverage, for example, while the green one is great for concentrated fire). Best of all, each weapon can be continually upgraded to frankly ridiculous levels. At its full power, the blue weapon unleashes waves of powerful shots that can clear the screen. This is like a bullet hell shooter where you're the one unleashing the hell! All this power comes at a cost, of course. Get hit and you're reverted back to your feeble two-shot standard weapon, and in a flash the odds swing overwhelmingly against you.

As the title indicates, *Twin Cobra* was the first Toaplan shooter to feature a simultaneous two-player mode. With two players blazing out the game is even more spectacular and no doubt boosted the game's popularity. So it's surprising that the co-op mode is absent from the Japanese version, *Kyukyoku Tiger* (*Ultimate Tiger*), which was released at the same time. There's a myriad of other changes between the two versions, the main one being that when you're hit, the action pauses and you're returned to a predefined position, where as in *Twin Cobra* you carry on instantly from the same position. This makes the Japanese version more difficult (at least for more casual players – see the Q&A with our expert player for a different viewpoint on page 40). It's not clear why these changes were made for the Western release, but it's presumed that American distributor Romstar requested them so the game could compete with the glut of two-player shooters.

Twin Cobra debuted in the UK at the Amusement Trade Exhibition in January 1988, where *C&VG*'s Clare Edgeley liked what she saw. "Fast moving with pretty graphics, *Twin Cobra* is bags more fun than *Thundercade*," she reported back, referencing a two-player shooter from Seta that would find its own calling at the back of the arcade. "Although it's the same scenario as *Thundercade*, it has a more gutsy feel, making it far more of a challenge." Nick Kelly was not as impressed, awarding the game 6/10 in *Commodore User*: "*Twin Cobra* passes most of the tests in terms of graphics, sound and playability. If coin-ops were records this would be a Stock Aitken Waterman release – slick, user-friendly and pretty much the same as the last one."

You'd have thought publishers would have gone after the conversion rights, especially as Telecomsoft had scored a hit with its versions of *Flying Shark*, and Ocean had previously brought *Slap Fight* to home computers, but *Twin Cobra* was destined to stay an arcade exclusive. That would ▶

▶ [Arcade] Red and blue cobras replace the single grey chopper seen in the Japanese version.

▶ [Arcade] Your first objective: grab the power-ups otherwise you won't survive the first area.

AIRWOLF EAT YOUR HEART OUT

SMART BOMB

You begin each life with three bombs and can collect extra ones in-game. Drop them to destroy both enemies and enemy fire within a wide radius. Save some for the bosses.

MULTI-MISSILE

Your standard weapon fires missiles front and centre. At full power it unleashes dozens of missiles, so you may want to stick with it rather than swapping for an alternative.

MULTI-DIRECTION BAZOOKA

A terrible name for a terrible weapon. Fires shots forwards, backwards, left and right, and is only good for dealing with enemies who attack from the rear. Puny, even when powered up.

"The only place you'd want to switch to the green laser is the level nine boss"

MARTIN BEDARD

» [Arcade] The green laser makes easy work of the heavily armed warships.

» [Arcade] Two players, both with maxed-out blue weapons, unleashing bullet hell on the enemy.

A ROUND-UP OF THE POWER-UPS YOU NEED TO SUCCEED

AUTO MACHINE GUN

Or 'green laser' as most folk know it. This beam is narrow but deadly, making it perfect for clearing the decks of boats and taking down bosses. Otherwise, use it sparingly.

MULTI-CANNON

The most formidable weapon in the game, providing you power it up a good amount. At maximum power nothing can beat it. It's just a question of how long can you hold onto it.

CONVERSION CAPERS

WHICH OF THE HOME VERSIONS HIT THE HEIGHTS?

PC ENGINE

YEAR: 1989

This is an excellent conversion from Taito. Graphically this Japanese exclusive sits somewhere between the NES and Mega Drive versions; while the gameplay is very close to the coin-op. All this shooting action packed onto a tiny HuCard – it's difficult to comprehend.

NES

YEAR: 1990

Another fantastic conversion (you may start sensing a theme here). There's no support for co-op play, and the sprites suffer from the usual flicker, but none of that really matters when the game plays this well. Plus all of the stages, weapons and bosses are included. Developed by Micronics, which also converted *Tiger Heli* to the NES.

MEGA DRIVE

YEAR: 1991

The lack of a two-player feature is a curious omission, and some strange palettes are used (such as the glowing yellow tanks on stage one). But, once again, when it comes to gameplay this delivers the authentic arcade experience – as you'd expect on the Mega Drive.

SHARP X68000

YEAR: 1993

The trusty X68000 powerhouse hosts another arcade-perfect port. The graphics, speed and sound are all comparable with the coin-op – in fact it sounds better than ever thanks to the machine's FM sound chip. At the time of release this was easily the most faithful version to date.

FM TOWNS MARTY

YEAR: 1994

The obscure Fujitsu console is home to yet another incredible conversion. It's almost identical to the X68000 version, but sounds even better as this was a disc game with a CD audio soundtrack. The remixed music adds an extra dimension to an already excellent experience.

PLAYSTATION

YEAR: 1996

Both *Twin Cobra* and *Kyuukyoku Tiger* are included on *Toaplan Shooting Battle*, along with the first game *Tiger Heli*. All of the games are arcade perfect, with a generous number of options to tweak, making this one of the best, and most coveted shmup collections.

MISSILE TANK

EXPERT TESTIMONY

WE TALK STRATEGY WITH MARTIN BEDARD, WHOSE TWIN COBRA HIGH SCORE IS RANKED NUMBER ONE ON TWIN GALAXIES.

Tell us a little about the details of your *Twin Cobra* record score?

My arcade record is 3,557,840, set at Funspot, Weirs Beach, in June 2007. Since then my personal best on MAME is 7,437,720, achieved in November 2015.

What's your history with the game?

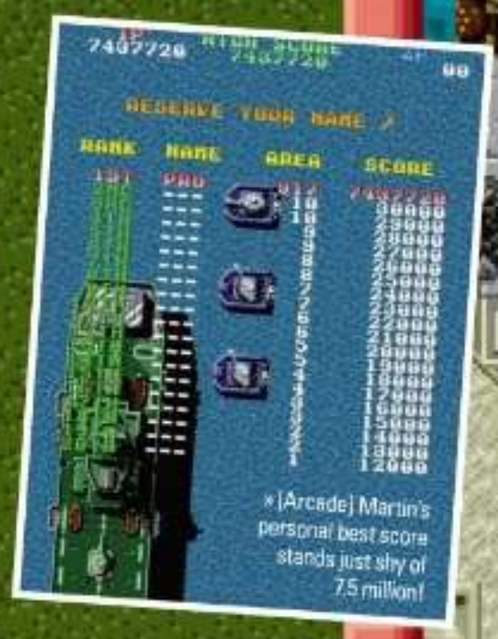
Around 2002 I started getting into MAME and searching for traditional shmups. *Twin Cobra* was a standout for its gameplay and music and I was excited to find it at Funspot during my first visit in June 2004.

What's your weapon of choice when going for a *Twin Cobra* high score?

The main workhorse is the blue spread weapon, which you'll be using 95% of the time. If everything goes right, the only place you'd want to switch to the green laser is the level nine boss. When you die it's better to use the red weapon until you've powered up a few times, since blue is inferior at low power levels. Never use the yellow devil.

How many loops did it take to achieve your score, and how does the difficulty increase on subsequent loops?

My MAME score ended on loop four stage nine. The difference between loops is the increase in enemy bullet speed. It's most noticeable in loops two and three where the speed increases by approximately 18% and 13% respectively. This continues at a slower rate until loop nine, where the speed is about double what it was in loop one. My goal is to reach and convincingly play through the loops where the bullet speed is maxed.



» [Arcade] Martin's personal best score stands just shy of 7.5 million!

How pleased are you with your score achievements in *Twin Cobra*?

Honestly, *Twin Cobra* feels like unfinished business. While the Japanese release has been marathoned, the western release does not appear to have been pushed to that point. This might be due to changes like the simultaneous two-player mode that increase the challenge in some aspects. Presumably due to performance issues, the frames at which weapon damage is registered are split between player one and two, which essentially halves single helicopter damage output, even when playing alone. This makes the game very different when dealing with large enemies or bosses since routes that rely on quickly defeating enemies are no longer possible.

» [Arcade] Martin's playthrough can be viewed on the MARP website (replay.marpirc.net).

We were under the impression that the Japanese version was trickier due to the checkpoint system?

The checkpoint system adds its own challenge. Some checkpoints are difficult to recover from, but all are doable. The gimped damage output of the western version adds more risk to the routes since you have to rely more on avoidance. Furthermore, your helicopter in the Western version moves a lot faster. Ultimately, which version is truly harder is something that can be argued.

"The difference between loops is the increase in enemy bullet speed"

MARTIN BEDARD

[Mega Drive] Despite some odd colour choices, the Mega Drive version is a decent blaster.

IN THIS SERIES

WHAT CAME BEFORE AND AFTER TWIN COBRA

TIGER HELI

YEAR: 1985

While riffing heavily on *Xevious* and *1942*, Toaplan's first shooter does introduce some of its own ideas, most noticeably the smart bomb. It's fun to play, but compared to *Twin Cobra* it's alarmingly sedate; a classic case of a game that's well and truly surpassed by its successor.

TWIN COBRA II

YEAR: 1995

Running on Taito's powerful F3 hardware, this belated sequel is a typically flashy product of the era where the visual effects (which are admittedly excellent) almost overshadow the gameplay. There are only six stages but it never lets up for a second. One for hardcore shooter fans.

HEAVY TANK

"Some checkpoints are difficult to recover from, but all are doable"

MARTIN BEDARD

BLUE FODDER

[NES] The Nintendo version was developed by Micronics, who also converted *Tiger Heli* to the NES.

[PlayStation] *Twin Cobra* was featured on *Toaplan Shooting Battle 1*. Despite the title, there were no further collections.

STANDARD GUNBOAT

change in 1989 when Taito developed a version for the PC Engine, albeit exclusively in Japan. This was followed by a NES version in 1990 which received a wider release – although despite carrying the *Twin Cobra* title in the west, the game supports just one player. This is perhaps understandable given the NES hardware, but the same concession can't be made for the Mega Drive version which also lacks co-op play (it's also docked points for clearly adding the subtitle *'Desert Attack Helicopter'* to take advantage of the Gulf War). One thing to note is that these three versions all reward the player with an animated end sequence, where as the arcade game just loops continually.

Later versions for the Sharp X68000 and FM Towns Marty were only released in Japan, so they faithfully follow the Japanese coin-op and are single-player only. A co-op version eventually made it home in 1996 as part of *Toaplan Shooting Battle 1* for PlayStation. This Japanese compilation features *Tiger Heli* plus both *Kyukyoku Tiger* and *Twin Cobra*, making it the perfect collection for fans of the series – and shooters in general. It even features a side (tate) view for that authentic arcade experience. The only thing missing is *Twin Cobra II*, the 1995 arcade sequel that was developed by Takumi following Toaplan's closure the previous year. The sequel *was* released for the Sega Saturn in 1997, as *Kyukyoku Tiger II Plus*, and came complete with a remixed soundtrack and exclusive Saturn-only stage.

If you want a blast on *Twin Cobra* today then emulation is obviously the easiest option. However for the true experience it really needs to be played on the original coin-op hardware. Time has moved on, but it's almost certainly still lurking at the back of an arcade *somewhere* in the world. ✱

RoadBlasters

PURE PALM POWER

» ATARI LYNX » 1990 » ATARI CORPORATION

I absolutely adored Atari's Lynx. I'd set my heart on it from the moment it was announced and while it was far from perfect – a stupidly short battery life, cumbersome size and lack of original games – I simply didn't care. I loved arcade games and the Lynx allowed me to play plenty of arcade classics in the palm of my hand. Sure, I could have purchased a Game Boy or a Game Gear (I would eventually buy both much later) but the Lynx was important to me because it basically had the games *I* wanted to play and that's an important consideration for any console purchase, handheld or otherwise.

For the most part, Atari's machine never disappointed me until it started to become painfully obvious that it didn't have the third-party support that was promised. I lost count of the times I would walk to my local computer shop, and eagerly ask about new Lynx games, only to be told that they had been delayed again. While things were rough in later years it was a fantastic thing to be a Lynx owner in the early days of the console's life. Arcade conversions were plenty and often to a very high standard. Indeed, some of them even put the Amiga and Atari ST versions to shame.

My favourite game from that period was the excellent *RoadBlasters*, which had been coded by the talented D Scott Williamson and was absolutely magnificent (he was also the mastermind behind the Lynx ports of *Toki* and *STUN Runner*). *RoadBlasters* was a truly sensational version of the arcade game and felt incredibly authentic, due to Williamson having access to the source code of the original arcade game, which allowed him to create such an authentic replication of it. Granted, there were no additional extras to crow to your friends about, but it didn't matter as *RoadBlasters* offered a tremendously satisfying arcade-like experience that the other handhelds of the time simply couldn't match. I no longer own a Lynx collection, but I'd imagine that will change with the release of the Analogue Pocket. If I do start collecting for Atari's system again, then *RoadBlasters* will be one of the first games I pick up.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES:

ARC SYSTEM WORKS

Today it's best known for its anime fighting games, but this Japanese developer has a heritage stretching back to the 8-bit consoles. We find out how the company went from creating conversions to combat classics

Words by Nick Thorpe

If you're the kind of gamer familiar with Arc System Works, you're probably best aware of the company as a developer of fighting games. The studio has carved out a formidable reputation in the genre, with popular series such as *Guilty Gear* and *BlazBlue* being supported by work on licensed games such as *Persona 4 Arena* and *Dragon Ball FighterZ*. But there's much more about this company that you may not know – for example, its early history as a conversion-focused developer, or its current status as owner of Technos properties like *Double Dragon* and *River City Ransom*. Little by little, over three decades Arc has grown into an important part of the gaming landscape.

Prior to the studio's creation, founder Minoru Kidooka had been working at Sega as an arcade hardware engineer. With the Famicom experiencing its golden era in Japan at the time, Kidooka and a number of colleagues left to form Arc Co, Ltd in 1988, with the goal of developing home console games. In the early days, the company concentrated on porting arcade games. "Most of the staff were still just engineers," explains Kidooka. "Being engineers, they couldn't create a brand-new game – draw up a plan, create all the assets and stuff. Also,

[SNES] *Sailor Moon S* is a bit of a hidden gem in the SNES library, thanks to its import-only status.

being a new company we didn't have much capital, so what we did best was to port games at the start." Despite that limitation, and the fact that Arc would often handle only part of a game – for example, just the programming – it began to grow and receive high-profile projects.

This phase, as we discover, wasn't a huge part of the company's history. "That lasted about four or five years. At the start there were around ten people, and that slowly expanded to 30 or so by the end of those years," says Kidooka. During that time, Arc Co, Ltd was renamed Arc System Works, and moved from its original office in the Nishi ward of Yokohama to a new one in the Kohoku ward. With new staff, the company became capable of creating entirely original games, though these were based on external properties. "We had quite a lot of projects from Bandai and from Sega – one of them we're mostly associated with is *Sailor Moon*, I'm sure quite a number of people are familiar with it. With the revenue we received, after four or five years we were finally able to get on track."

As it happens, this was the ideal time to move into original game development, as Kidooka recalls. "Back then it was also the era that Nintendo was shining the brightest. There was also Sega, but ultimately in Japan, Nintendo was all over the place," he explains. "That is when Sony announced the PlayStation, and with that announcement came a big business move – that anyone could be a publisher. That was when we decided on a new venture." Rather than attempting to develop an original game and shop it around to publishers, Arc System Works opted to self-publish. This was a gamble – if the games were successful, the company would control its own intellectual property and earn most of the money, but it was also fully exposed to the financial consequences should its games fail.

Although Arc's decision to self-publish was driven by Sony's policies, and its first self-published game was the PlayStation exclusive mech battle game *Exector*, the company never strayed from its path of multiplatform development. *Virtual Open Tennis* was developed for the Saturn, and the *Wizard's Harmony* games were developed for both consoles. "Coming from a hardware background, it was a fun era to work in," says Kidooka. "As a company, we can't just say, 'We want to go with Console A, and that's it' – we have to be able to work with multiple platforms. Personally, I like this kind of work," he says. However, he does confess that he had a definite favourite in that particular generation. "The Sega Saturn was still a revolutionary console itself, but it was really a black box – we were like, 'What the heck is this?' PlayStation was a much easier piece of hardware to work on."

It was during this late Nineties drive to create original games that the company created the ▶

[SNES] Quite a number of Arc's early games were in the racing genre, including *Cyber Spin*.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

MINORU KIDOOKA

After leaving Sega to set up Arc System Works, Kidooka was a programmer on many of the company's early games, before moving into production roles. Today he remains with the company as its CEO.

TOSHIMICHI MORI

Mori first worked with Arc System Works as an artist on *Guilty Gear X*, at codeveloper PicPac Airreal. He joined Arc System Works in 2003, and he's still with the company today as chief development officer.

TAKESHI YAMANAKA

Starting at Arc System Works over a decade ago, Yamanaka has worked on games including the *Jake Hunter* and *Guilty Gear* series, as well as the original *BlazBlue*. Most recently, he served as producer of *Kill La Kill IF*.

> "As a company, we can't just say, 'We want to go with Console A, and that's it' – we have to be able to work with multiple platforms"
> Minoru Kidooka

[Master System] Despite being a new company, Arc was given high-profile conversions like *Moonwalker* very early on.

DNA OF ARC SYSTEM WORKS

ARCADE HERITAGE

■ Arc System Works was founded by former arcade game engineers, and many of its early projects were home console conversions of arcade hits. Ironically, the developer would be drawn back into the arcade market by the popularity of fighting games like *Guilty Gear*, which are perfectly suited to the coin-op environment.

ANIME GAMES

■ In the Nineties, Arc System Works was responsible for plenty of games based on the popular anime series *Sailor Moon*. The company took on fewer licences while it established the *Guilty Gear* series, but has developed *Dragon Ball Z*, *Fist Of The North Star*, *One Piece* and *Kill La Kill* games over the last 15 years.

FIGHTING GAMES

■ Although it produced original games before *Guilty Gear*, this game was Arc System Works' big breakthrough in the market. Since the introduction of *BlazBlue* in 2008, the company has since been famed for its excellent fighting games, and entrusted to bring the likes of *Persona* and *Granblue Fantasy* into the genre.

2D GAMES

■ The *Guilty Gear* games were distinguished by their use of high-resolution 2D art, and Arc System Works continues to embrace sprites in games like the *Persona 4 Arena* and the *BlazBlue* series. In recent times, it has even managed to animate cel-shaded 3D models to look as if they're actually sprites.

PLATFORM AGNOSTICISM

■ Arc System Works has never tied itself to a preferred platform – in the early years, it simply went where the work was. In more recent times, most of its releases have been multiplatform, and interestingly the *Guilty Gear Xrd* games have even allowed for online play between PS3 and PS4 owners.

▶ first game in its hit *Guilty Gear* series. This was directed by Daisuke Ishiwatari, now chief creative officer at Arc System Works, who had joined the company in the mid-Nineties and got his start working on a *Paddington Bear* edutainment game for the Sega Pico. "That was around the period when *Tekken* came out, and quite a number of people within the industry asked 'Why are you going back to 2D now, of all times?'" says Kidooka. "But back then, it was one of the most innovative 2D fighters of the era, with the complex mechanics. Before the game was released, there were quite a lot of people queuing to play the game at shows like Tokyo Game Show." The first *Guilty Gear* was a PlayStation exclusive published by Sammy, and received an uneven critical response but sales were strong enough to justify a sequel. This set the company on its current path – over two decades later, Arc System Works is most renowned as a developer that specialises in one-on-one fighting games.

For its next project, rather than developing for consoles again, Arc returned to the company's roots. "Because my background was from arcade hardware manufacturing, I thought, 'Let's try to go back to the arcade,'" Kidooka explains. In cooperation with the now-defunct developer PicPac Airreal, where current chief development officer Toshimichi Mori was then working, *Guilty Gear X* was created. The gameplay was greatly refined compared to the original game, and the beautiful high-resolution sprites – created at the behest of publisher Sammy – set the game apart from rival fighters. Critical reception was positive, and further sequels went into production.

After deciding to self-publish, Arc had cut back on its work on licensed games. It still took on the odd project, like a Dreamcast shogi game endorsed by professional player Torahiko

■ [Game Gear] You'll often find surprises like *Sonic Drift 2* when looking back at Arc's early work.

TIMELINE

1982 ■ Arc Co, Ltd is founded by Minoru Kidooka in May, comprised mainly of former Sega employees.

1990 ■ Sega releases the Master System conversion of *Michael Jackson's Moonwalker*, developed by Arc.

1991 ■ Arc Co, Ltd changes its name to Arc System Works, and moves to the northern Kohoku ward.

1994 ■ *Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon S* is released for the SNES, the first of Arc System Works' many fighting games.

1995 ■ PlayStation mech shooter *Exector* becomes Arc System Works' first original, self-published game.

1998 ■ The first *Guilty Gear* game is released in Japan, published by Sammy. It wouldn't arrive in the UK until 2000.

1999 ■ *Prismaticallization* debuts on Dreamcast and becomes Arc System Works' first entry into the visual novel genre.

[PlayStation] *Exector* was Arc System Works' first self-published game, made possible by Sony's third-party policies.

[Dreamcast] Arc has done a good few visual novels, though early efforts like *Prismaticallization* were never localised.

[Arcade] *Guilty Gear X* was a huge step up over its predecessor, and a breath of fresh air in a stagnating genre.

Tanaka, and a PS2 *Grappler Baki* tie-in that received a PAL release as *Fighting Fury*. And since *Guilty Gear* started to pull focus, Arc was also less prolific with its original non-fighting games – though it did manage to release the romantic visual novel *Prismaticallization* and the detective mystery *Digital Holmes*. It was understandable, as *Guilty Gear* was marketable internationally and the other games never made it outside of Japan. But with the *Guilty Gear* series firmly established, the company began to take on projects slightly more frequently from 2004 onwards. The company combined this specialism with its newfound reputation in fighting games, resulting in games like *Fist Of The North Star* and *Sengoku Basara X*. It also began to try other things, like the fantasy-themed fighter *Battle Fantasia*. The 3D action-strategy game *Guilty Gear 2: Overture*, meanwhile, was born out of Daisuke Ishiwatari's wish to create something outside of the fighting genre.

In 2008, Arc System Works drew considerable attention for introducing a new fighter called *BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger*, which persisted with the use of 2D sprites. "When we were making *Guilty Gear XX* on the Sega NAOMI arcade boards, there was a period where we were transferring everything to high resolution," says Toshimichi Mori, chief development officer at Arc System Works. "When Taito introduced Type X, everything was shifting to 16:9 and HD resolutions. The order came from the CEO himself – we might as well make a new game anyway, since we were going to have to make something for this new era of HD." At this point, Kidooka jumps in to explain this request. "Back then, *Guilty Gear* was already ten years into its history, and of course there's a core fanbase, but new players were finding it very hard to come into at this point in time. To reach out to a new market, we decided we needed a totally new game."

> "Eventually we grew the community enough to hold a national tournament"
> Toshimichi Mori

Surprisingly, *BlazBlue* couldn't rely on crossover interest from *Guilty Gear* players. "Back then, the old core *Guilty Gear* fans were like, 'This is *not* the game that we expected, and they were very harsh," says Mori, though he notes that the reaction elsewhere was more positive. "The game was generally quite well received from all perspectives, from the new fanbase. The main reason is that *Guilty Gear* had reached the peak of the growth of the techniques, so if new players came in there was no way they could beat ten-year veterans." *BlazBlue* arrived during a revival of the fighting genre, alongside the arcade releases of *Street Fighter IV*, *The King Of Fighters XII*, *Arcana Heart 2* and *Tatsunoko Vs Capcom*, and managed to hold its own against such strong competition. In part, that's because Mori realised the importance of proactive work to nurture the competitive scene. "In those days, I was quite heavily involved in trying to have tournaments running all over Japan. Slowly increasing the community, getting all the local tournaments running – eventually we grew the community enough to hold a national tournament."

Since then, Arc System Works has continued to grow the *BlazBlue* series with new entries – *Continuum Shift*, *Chrono Phantasma* and *Central Fiction* – and released updated versions of *Guilty Gear XX*. But that's not all the company has done, as the company carved out an interesting niche for itself on the WiiWare service with games like *Family Table Tennis* ▶

2000
■ *Guilty Gear X* is released, and is Arc System Works' first arcade game. Console versions soon follow.

2003
■ Evolution hosts an Arc System Works game for the first time, holding a *Guilty Gear X2* tournament won by Daigo Umehara.

2007
■ *Guilty Gear 2: Overture* takes the series from 2D fighting to 3D action adventure. Its reception is lukewarm.

2008
■ *BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger* is released in arcades, establishing the company's second most prolific fighting series.

2011
■ Arc System Works fully acquires the *Guilty Gear* intellectual property from Sega Sammy Holdings.

2013
■ For the first time, Arc System Works has over 100 employees. That number will grow to around 200.

2015
■ The studio acquires the Technos back catalogue, including the *Double Dragon* and *Kunio-kun* series.

2017
■ Arc System Works branches out into western game development and creates a studio in Torrance, California.

FIVE DEFINING GAMES

BISHOUJO SENSHI SAILOR MOON S: JOUGAI RANTOU!? SHUYAKU SOUDATSUSEN

■ Arc System Works spent its early years as a contract developer, and this one was amongst the best of its licensed games – not to mention a sign of its future in anime-based fighting games. This SNES game never left Japan, but has picked up a cult following amongst hardcore fighting game fans.

GUILTY GEAR X

■ The *Guilty Gear* series is Arc System Works' most famous, and while the original game has its charms, it was the arcade sequel that established it as a serious contender in the fighting game market. With gorgeous high-resolution sprites and more finely balanced game design, it quickly became a fan favourite.

BLAZBLUE: CALAMITY TRIGGER

■ Any of the *BlazBlue* games are worth a fighting game fan's time, but we've chosen the original entry here. The second major fighting series that Arc launched was pretty great right from the outset, with beautiful HD sprites, a great soundtrack and a cast of mechanically distinct, interesting characters.

▶ and *Family Mini Golf*. It has also become known for visual novels including the *Jake Hunter* mystery games, which it acquired from WorkPlay (which itself acquired the property from Data East) and the *Xblaze* games, which take place prior to the events of the *BlazBlue* series. Even Arc's fighting games often include visual novel modes. The company has also dipped its toes into other genres, such as when it developed *Hard Corps: Uprising* for Konami.

Then, the next big fighting project was the new *Guilty Gear Xrd* series, which utilises cel-shaded 3D models that animate as if they're 2D sprites. "When we were still trying to draft out the core plan for the *Guilty Gear Xrd* series, Ishiwatari was like, 'I want to make a project that *wows* people' – he wanted not just to surprise them, but make them look on in awe," says Takeshi Yamanaka, producer of the *Guilty Gear* series. "Technology has finally advanced to the point where we can finally fulfil the vision he had when he made the first *Guilty Gear*." Like Mori, Yamanaka puts great emphasis on community. "My ultimate vision is that what is most important is the feeling of connecting with other people," he explains, touching on the philosophy behind the series, which will continue with *Guilty Gear Strive* in 2020. "Of course the single player content is definitely there and is not to be overlooked, but ultimately the main focus, the main fun part is fighting with other people."

> "Technology has finally advanced to the point where we can finally fulfil the vision Ishiwatari had when he made the first Guilty Gear"
>
> Takeshi Yamanaka

Despite the fact that Arc System Works has done astonishing work with cel-shaded 3D models in recent years, long after most of its peers have abandoned the practice, Arc System Works still uses actual 2D sprites in recent games like *BlazBlue Cross Tag Battle*. "It's just something I wanted to try to do," says Mori. "It's not a technique that's outdated or anything, it's still very applicable. There's no real reason to say, 'This is outdated, we're not going to do this any more' – this is one way to present a game, and I feel that it's still working." Despite working on the impressive 2.5D *Guilty Gear* games, Yamanaka agrees. "One may be using newer, state-of-the-art technology, one may be using a more traditional method. Ultimately, they're just different ways of presentation – they achieve their purpose, they still have their merits." As such, the company is something of a champion of 2D, one of the last companies to push sprite work to new and greater heights.

Another way in which Arc System Works champions the past is in its role as the custodian of certain classic games – most notably those of Technos, which it acquired from Million Co, Ltd in 2015. "It was actually a long collaboration between the two companies, for over ten years," Kidooka explains. "The company has always been doing new games, especially for *Kunio-kun*. The licence holders for Technos Japan were also of a good age already, and felt it was time to pass it on to the next generation, so they were like, 'Maybe Arc can try to take on the legacy.'" The company continues to introduce new games in these series, recently working with WayForward on *River City Girls*.

Today, as well as creating games in its own series and those it has acquired, Arc System Works is now a key contact for rights holders who want a fighting game based around their

■ [Xbox 360] *BlazBlue*'s HD sprites prove that 2D has always been a valid stylistic choice.

■ [Xbox 360] Arc isn't known for run-and-guns, but there was no way it would pass up *Hard Corps: Uprising*.

JAKE HUNTER: MEMORIES OF THE PAST

■ Outside of fighting games, Arc System Works is most prolific in the production of visual novels – and of those, the *Jake Hunter* games are the most accessible. This DS entry in the series offers six different stories to play through, and plenty of extras including some amusing comedy side stories.

DRAGON BALL FIGHTERZ

■ Here's a game that embodies everything Arc does well in one package. The cel-shaded anime graphics are gorgeous, the combat design is welcoming to newcomers but offers enough depth for competitive play, and performance is great across all formats including the often difficult Switch. It's a dream come true for fans.

■ [Saturn] *Virtual Open Tennis* goes to show there are few genres or systems that Arc hasn't tried.

■ [PS4] *Kill La Kill IF* is Arc's most recent anime licence, and is a 3D brawler rather than a 2D fighting game.

property. Recent examples include the likes of *Dragon Ball FighterZ* and *Kill La Kill IF*. "It's increased quite significantly in recent years," confirms Mori. "I'm always getting scolded by these two," adds a laughing Kidooka. "I'll say, 'Yes, we'll do the job, thank you very much for the offer!' And then they say, 'No, we're not going to do it!' Generally, whatever the hardware is, whatever the platform specifications are, if there's an offer I'll take it." This sort of work does come with extra requirements, but Kidooka understands the need for them. "There's an additional layer of approval that we have to deal with because we're not working on our own properties, but with that difficulty comes quality. Even working on our own things, we have to gather feedback from lots of different people."

Arc System Works expanded into America in 2017, with Kidooka's aim being to be closer to that market to pick up feedback on the ground, and celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2018 – the YouTube music video it released to celebrate that milestone is well worth checking out. That's really key – Arc System Works now has around 200 employees and has forged an identity as a developer of excellent fighting games, but it retains the quirky nature that made *Guilty Gear* stand out in 1998.

So where is the company going in the future? Kidooka turns the question over to the producers. "The most important thing for me is to create more content that is recognisable worldwide," Mori answers. "We have somewhat established a foothold as a fighting game company, so we wish to use that as leverage to continue to create inspiring fighting games – but also not neglecting our other areas and other genres, to make for a more worldwide approach," says Yamanaka. "In the future, we may make games that aren't fighting games, but we wish to achieve a style that fans will look at and think, 'Ah, this is a game by Arc' – to have a recognisable 'Arc image'." But we suspect that with such distinctive games as *Guilty Gear Xrd* to its credit, the company already has the image – broadening it beyond fighting is all that needs to be done to fulfil Yamanaka's hopes. ★

THE MAKING OF GHOST HUNTERS

Super Robin Hood's success convinced Philip and Andrew Oliver to develop another platformer, but they also wanted to innovate. Philip explains how firing mechanics and animation experiments helped to differentiate the highly original Ghost Hunters

WORDS BY RORY MILNE

IN THE KNOW

- **PUBLISHER:** DATASOFT
- **DEVELOPER:** CODEMASTERS
- **RELEASED:** 1987
- **PLATFORM:** AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
- **GENRE:** PLATFORMER

It seems odd now, but when a British videogame was popular in the Eighties the automatic response wasn't always to make a sequel. That said, many developers opted to revisit genres that they found success with, and the Oliver twins took this route after topping the charts with *Super Robin Hood*. However, as Philip Oliver explains, they decided to make their second platformer as different as possible from their first. "We had produced *Super Robin Hood*, and it was hugely successful," he beams. "So we thought about another game that would make a great platformer that wouldn't cannibalise the sales of *Super Robin Hood*, but would use all of the skills and experience that we had got from making it."

One area where the Olivers distinguished their follow-up was with its setting, and a love of ghosts provided them with a suitably distinct theme. "We had used a castle in *Super Robin Hood*," Philip remembers, "so we were thinking we needed something completely different. We had always been fans of haunted houses and *Scooby Doo* – and we liked *Ghostbusters*, so we thought that it would be quite good to have a scary mansion as the setting."

[Amstrad CPC] *Ghost Hunters* was originally called *Bust-A-Buster First Slime Part I*.

The twins also differentiated *Ghost Hunters*' hero from *Super Robin Hood*'s English protagonist by making him American and giving him the unlikely name of 'Hunk Studbuckle'. "Everything from America was a little bit cooler, so we were trying to think of an American name," Philip reasons. "*Rambo* was probably a influence, as we wanted to make sure that the player was going to feel like they were controlling somebody that was kick-ass!"

Another action hero influenced Hunk Studbuckle's animation, although he was a videogame star rather than a Hollywood A-lister. "We had *Impossible Mission* running on the family TV," Philip recalls, "and we videoed it, freeze-framed the man running and tried to copy him frame by frame. How close we actually got was debatable, but that was certainly what we were going for."

The convincing movement of *Ghost Hunters*' protagonist further set it apart from its predecessor, but not as much as the subsequent addition of shooting gallery mechanics. "Back then, we would just try anything, and we thought we would come up with a unique way of tackling the enemies in a platformer," Philip says of the innovation. "But I think we messed up the controls for the shooting, really, and we half-knew that they weren't working brilliantly."

But despite having reservations over their game's crosshair targeting mechanism, the brothers had no doubt over their choices of supernatural targets. "We liked the idea of Dracula turning into a bat and flying around," Philip enthuses, "and obviously the hero couldn't be a ghost hunter without there being ghosts. We also had some skeletons – because

DEVELOPER HIGHLIGHTS

SUPER ROBIN HOOD
SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1986

DIZZY (PICTURED)
SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1987

FANTASY WORLD DIZZY
SYSTEM: AMSTRAD CPC, VARIOUS
YEAR: 1989

Just months after the Oliver twins made *Ghost Hunters* they created their first *Dizzy* title.

[Amstrad CPC] About three quarters of the way through *Ghost Hunters* the game introduces a rock-hard platforming challenge.

skeletons had been cool ever since Ray Harryhausen's *Jason And The Argonauts*!"

Two of *Ghost Hunter*'s final gameplay mechanisms were an energy bar to reflect damage and a 'Terrometer' that spiked and drained energy when certain foes appeared. "We were trying to indicate how scary Nightmare Mansion was," Philip explains, "and so we came up with the idea of the Terrometer. We already had the flicking needle code from *Magic Clock*, so we thought we would put a dial in to add a bit of visual interest."

But on reviewing the Olivers' completed game, their publisher voiced some concerns over its *Rambo*-inspired placeholder title, and changed it to reflect its hero's chosen profession. "We *were* worried about calling it *Bust-A-Buster First Slime Part I*," Philip concedes, "and obviously Codemasters decided, 'No we shouldn't!' because it was a bit too close. But it *was* funny!"

The newly retitled *Ghost Hunters* was subsequently released to positive reviews and steady sales, although Philip notes that this response fell short of what had been expected.

> **"Rambo was probably a influence, as we wanted to make sure that the player was going to feel like they were controlling somebody that was kick-ass!"**
> **Philip Oliver**

"It didn't sell or review quite as well as *Super Robin Hood*," Philip sighs, "but it did okay. We were a bit surprised, because we thought they should have been about the same."

When given a theoretical chance to tweak the inventive platformer, Philip suggests trading innovation for a concept proven by the movie *Ghostbusters*, before assessing *Ghost Hunters* in light of its short development period. "I would definitely change the firing; that was a mistake," he contends. "It should have been a horizontal beam that fired out, and then you would have used 'up' and 'down' to pull the arc around. But I think for the short time we took doing *Ghost Hunters* it was a great platformer." ★

[Amstrad CPC] *Ghost Hunters*' opening stage starts the player's character next to a chalice that activates a lift.

[Amstrad CPC] As soon as *Ghost Hunters*' hero frees his brother it's a race to Nightmare Mansion's exit.

CONVERSION CAPERS

AMSTRAD CPC

The Amstrad original really plays to the system's strengths. It uses the CPC's four-colour mode, but clever use of the limited hues available makes the game's smoothly animated sprites and Gothic backgrounds seem like they're rendered in a far more extensive palette. It also boasts an atmospheric pregame tune, excellent in-game sound effects and an impressive speech sample. Finally, its presentation is superb, particularly its animated ghost, illustrated side-panel and ornate play-area borders.

2X SPECTRUM

There's a lot to be said for the Spectrum version. Its upbeat take on the original's title music sounds great considering the limited hardware, it plays identically to its Amstrad inspiration throughout, and it adds an in-game map and descriptions of its collectible objects. Where it's lacking is in its restricted colour palette and minimal sound effects – multicoloured borders aside, the game is monochrome, and its audio is limited to a recurring speech sample.

C64

It's a case of 'more is less' when it comes to the C64 version of *Ghost Hunters*' colour scheme – it combines numerous colours that don't work well together. Its sprites and backdrops don't look great either, and its scene-setting music and sound effects lack ambition given the system's audio capabilities. To be fair, the original's gameplay is all there, but its mechanics are poorly implemented, and so using lifts, targeting the gunsight and avoiding hazards in the C64 version is often deeply frustrating.

ULTIMATE GUIDE:

SUPER RACER

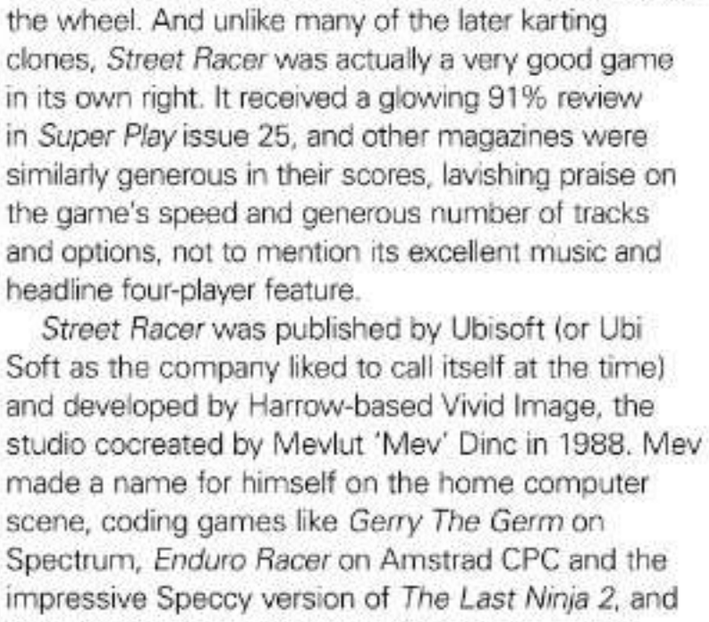
IT'S 1994, AND SUPER MARIO KART REIGNS SUPREME OVER THE RACING CATEGORY IT CREATED. BUT WAIT! HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!

Words by Lewis Packwood

Although *Super Mario Kart* wasn't the first game to feature go-karts, Mario's surprising move into power-up-fuelled racing essentially created an entirely new genre back in 1992. And the copycats weren't far behind: by the late Nineties and early Noughties, it seemed like every month would bring the release of yet another mediocre karting game with a different brand slapped onto it, whether it was *Woody Woodpecker* or *The Muppets*. These homages weren't all bad, by any means: but for every excellent kart caper (like *Crash Team Racing*) there was an abomination (hello, *Crazy Frog Racer*).

The first *Super Mario Kart* imitator is widely recognised to be the Game Gear's *Sonic Drift*, released in March 1994 – but that game never made it out of Japan. For UK players, then, *Street Racer* – which debuted in November 1994 – was their first taste of kart-based shenanigans without Mario behind the wheel. And unlike many of the later karting clones, *Street Racer* was actually a very good game in its own right. It received a glowing 91% review in *Super Play* issue 25, and other magazines were similarly generous in their scores, lavishing praise on the game's speed and generous number of tracks and options, not to mention its excellent music and headline four-player feature.

Street Racer was published by Ubisoft (or Ubi Soft as the company liked to call itself at the time) and developed by Harrow-based Vivid Image, the studio cocreated by Mevlut 'Mev' Dinc in 1988. Mev made a name for himself on the home computer scene, coding games like *Gerry The Germ* on Spectrum, *Enduro Racer* on Amstrad CPC and the impressive Speccy version of *The Last Ninja 2*, and Vivid Image would later find its first big success with the release of *First Samurai* on the Amiga in 1991. Mev recalls that the idea of making a racing game first emerged while the studio was working on the sequel to *First Samurai*. "I don't know how it started, but we felt we should do more than one game at a time," he says. "So while working on *Second Samurai*, we came up with this idea of doing a kart game. We wanted to do something like *Mario Kart* but a little bit different. I wanted close combat while racing, which made ours very unique, and of course, visually it was completely different: *Mario Kart* was more cartoony, whereas ours was a bit more grown-up, more serious. So with fighting and racing, I came up with the name *Street Racer*:



» [SNES] *Street Racer* came on a tiny eight-megabit cart; for comparison, *Donkey Kong Country* was on a 32-megabit cart.

» [SNES] You'll need to do some smart driving if you want to get ahead of the pack.

"WE WANTED TO DO SOMETHING LIKE MARIO KART BUT A LITTLE BIT DIFFERENT. I WANTED CLOSE COMBAT WHILE RACING"

Mev Dinc

at the time, *Street Fighter II* was very big. I actually copied the *Street Fighter* logo, to be honest."

Like *Street Fighter II*, *Street Racer* featured eight characters from around the world, each with tracks that reflected their country of origin. And the characters have a variety of fighting moves at their disposal: regular attacks hit to the left and right, ideal for smashing rival drivers trying to overtake, while each character has two rechargeable special attacks that run the gamut from turning their car into a flying machine to electrocuting nearby racers. Your driver has a yellow and red energy bar, which looks highly similar to the one in *Street Fighter II* and depletes with each hit taken – the lower your energy bar, the slower your car goes.

In this sense, *Street Racer* goes down quite a different path from *Super Mario Kart*, not to mention the many karting clones that followed it. Those games tend to focus on drivers picking up random power-ups, so everyone has access to the same potential moves, whereas in *Street Racer*, each character has their own unique specials available throughout the race. Still, there are a few things for racers to pick up on the track as they go: a spanner icon repairs damage to your car, while the blue arrow icon gives you a turbo boost that you can use at any point (you also get one of these for completing each lap). Then there are stars ▶

» [SNES] If you squint really hard here, Hodja looks a little bit like a famous Italian plumber.

"THE FUNNY THING IS, WE DID IT WITHOUT THE DSP CHIP. MARIO KART USED A DSP CHIP, WHICH HELPS THE SNES BECOME MORE POWERFUL"

Mev Dinc

to collect – in a nice touch, the driver with the most of these at the end of the race gets a bonus point, which can help you to climb the tournament rankings. And then there are the bombs. Don't drive over the bombs, obviously.

But perhaps the thing that set *Street Racer* apart the most from its illustrious forebear was a certain technical achievement. "I always enjoy coming up with a couple of really unique things in whatever project we're working on," says Mev. "So with *Street Racer*, even though it was our first console game, I wanted to do something really unique and challenging – obviously it was the unique simultaneous four-player racing."

Whereas *Super Mario Kart* was limited to two players, *Street Racer* was able to host four at once in split-screen, via the SNES multitap. So was it difficult to implement? "Oh god, yeah," says Mev. "The funny thing is, we did it without the DSP chip. *Mario Kart* used a DSP chip, which helps the SNES become more powerful: they used the chip to do a lot of the calculations and stuff. But it was quite expensive to have the DSP chip on the cart, which in turn made the games more expensive. So we couldn't do that really – our publisher, Ubisoft, wouldn't have liked to have to add $3 to the cartridge price. So I discussed with Tony and Chris West, the developers: Chris, the programmer, was an amazing, very talented guy, and Tony was a brilliant artist. I asked whether we could do it without the DSP chip and with four-player, and Chris was such a great coder that one day he turned up with this amazing four-player split screen demo. And that was it. We just kept at it and we worked really hard and made sure that it was really fast as well. I think *Mario Kart* was 30 frames a second if it was on a two-player split-screen, and even our four-player screen was

THE WORLD WARRIORS

EIGHT CHARACTERS FROM ACROSS THE GLOBE GATHER TO DO BATT... ER, RACE

HODJA

Mev Dinc reveals Hodja's origin story: "I come from Turkey, so I thought it'd be great to have a character from Turkey. I ended up choosing this really weird folklore character – it's like a traditional character in Turkey, it dates back centuries. So that's why Hodja's age is 400-plus, where the other characters were in their early teens or twenties. He had this amazing special move, his car would turn into a magic carpet."

FRANK

He may have dropped the 'enstein's monster' for his racing debut, but true to type, Frank is still hanging around Gothic castles if his tracks are anything to go by. They're also tough, similar to Bowser's courses in *Super Mario Kart*. Frank has some nifty specials, sprouting bat wings for one and spewing ghosts for the other to attack any players approaching from the rear. He is *very slow* though.

SUZULU

Suzulu has extremely impressive handling and excellent attack stats, but he is rather lacking when it comes to actual defence, meaning he's best suited for a 'hit first and then run away' strategy. His spear attack is rather fiddly to use and can be hard to aim, but his Rhino Charge is excellent for barging opponents out of the way with nasty big spiked wheels. He's clearly geared towards skilled racers.

BIFF

The baseball-bat-wielding American has fairly average stats across the board, save for a high attack rating – making him an ideal choice for the more aggressive player. As well as swinging his aforementioned bat, Biff has the ability to grapple onto unlucky opponents and bump them out of the way with widening wheels. His home tracks are in an impressive stadium filled with popping flashbulbs.

MEV DINC

THE VIVID IMAGE COFOUNDER REFLECTS ON HIS LONG CAREER

How did you get started in the videogames industry?

I started way back in 1983. It sounds like a long time ago, and it was! At the time I was working at a cable factory down in Southampton and a friend of mine, you know, from the shop floor, I think he had a ZX81, and he kept going on about how wonderful it was. I had absolutely no interest in computers or games, but somehow he convinced me to purchase my first computer, which was a ZX Spectrum.

It was absolutely amazing. And then I completely self-taught [myself] machine code programming and all about the ZX Spectrum, and I did my first professional game in 1985, which was *Gerry The Germ* published by Telecomsoft – Firebird to be exact.

You're well known for your port of *Last Ninja 2* on the ZX Spectrum, how did that come about?

At the time, *Last Ninja* on the C64 was such a huge hit, and [the publisher Activision had] spent eight months or something on the Spectrum version, but they just couldn't get what they wanted out of the developer. And then they asked me to, you know, rescue, *Last Ninja* on the Spectrum. And I said, 'Oh, come on, guys, you know, I wanna do my own games.' But it was such a big game, they really almost begged me to sort of help them out.

It was a complete rewrite – it was beyond rescue, you know. And then I learned that System 3 had already planned to start developing *Last Ninja 2*, so I suggested that I should be involved in doing *Last Ninja 2* instead from day one so I could do both Spectrum and Amstrad versions. And System 3 agreed, so I ended up doing *Last Ninja 2* along with the Commodore 64 version, with John Twiddy and the artist Hugh Riley. We became very close friends during development, which took us eight months or so – and then through *Last Ninja 2* I became really like one of the top Spectrum programmers.

How did you end up starting Vivid Image?

As I always wanted to do my own games, I'd already told System 3 that I would leave after *Last Ninja 2*, and John, he also liked the idea of setting up a new company, so we ended up setting up Vivid Image in 1988. The first two games were *Hammerfist* and *Time Machine*. *Time Machine* was a really clever concept, going back and forth between time zones. It would make a great game now, really.

First Samurai was a huge hit for us in 1991. It was voted the Game Of The Year, which was very pleasing. But unfortunately, Robert Maxwell died, and Mirrorsoft were jointly publishing *First Samurai*. The whole group went into receivership, and unfortunately they couldn't really duplicate and sell the game on the Amiga, which was really a great shame for us, because we expected to sell a lot. Despite all the problems, we still sold 80,000 units or something.

What did you do after *Street Racer 2* was shelved?

I ended up creating a game engine called Actor, which was quite impressive. It was like a full-blown 3D engine with dynamic physics in it. So we quickly forgot about *Street Racer 2* and started concentrating on Actor. I felt that the technology in terms of software had come a long way, so had the hardware, so I felt we could really start making interactive movies – that's why I called the engine Actor.

And then we started working on some really big ideas for a very ambitious concept to do an interactive movie – with each gamer's timing and ability, you could get different results. Everyone who saw the demo was very, very impressed. We ended up doing a special demo for Intel for the launch of Pentium 4 in 2000, so they used our demo for the worldwide promotion.

What happened after Vivid Image closed down?

I had already decided that I wanted to move back to my native Turkey, because at the time there was no professional game development or publishing to speak of, so I felt maybe I've done enough in the UK and maybe I could go to Turkey and kickstart the games sector here: which is exactly what I did.

I've been sort of semi-retired since 2013, just helping young developers and mentoring them. And recently I finished a book, an autobiography, effectively. It's sort of like my life and my work. So I'm going to release it in Turkey first, and then I'm hoping to do the English version and release it in the UK, probably sometime in 2020.

RAPHAEL

Did someone say *OutRun*? Raphael's red Ferrari and blue-sky tracks are clearly inspired by Sega's arcade classic – no bad thing. The Italian's red motor boasts an impressive top speed, too, although it's let down by atrocious acceleration. His grappling hook is handy for snaring opponents in front, but it's tricky to use – still, his outsized sound system is perfect for foiling would-be overtakers.

SURF SISTER

Along with Hodja, Surf Sister is a great all-rounder and the perfect character for beginners. That said, the Australian doesn't have anything in her arsenal that's quite as nifty as Hodja's handy flying carpet move. Her beach-based tracks are highly reminiscent of the Koopa Beach levels in *Super Mario Kart*, although here we get a lovely rendition of Sydney Opera House in the background.

HELMUT

German flying ace Helmut has the highest defence rating in the game, as well as a couple of handy special moves in the form of spinning blades and the ability to sprout wings from his car (plane?) and fly short distances. His attacks are incredibly weak, mind so he's not one to use if you favour aggression in your racing. You'll likely find him loitering around old airfields, naturally.

SUMO SAN

Did someone say E Honda? Still, rather than a hundred-hand slap, Sumo San has taken a leaf out of Blanka's book, preferring instead to zap his opponents with a very dangerous electric field; alternatively, he'll simply jump on their heads. He drives a fancy caterpillar-tracked vehicle around a futuristic-looking Tokyo, and as such has some of the best handling stats in the game.

» [SNES] Variable stats mean you'll always find a suitable kart to use.

CONVERSION CAPERS

YES, STREET RACER EVEN MADE IT ONTO THE AMIGA, BELIEVE IT OR NOT

SNES
1994

The original – and, in our opinion, best – version of *Street Racer* on the Super Nintendo featured 24 tracks and a four-player split-screen mode, a first for a racing game on the system. It all flew along at a tidy 60 frames per second, too, despite coming on a tiny eight-megabit cart with no enhancement chips.

MEGA DRIVE
1995

The Mega Drive version has notably worse sound and music than the SNES original, and the lack of Mode 7 means that here the power-ups appear as flat sprites rather than 3D icons laid on the track. The Rumble mode is also somewhat inferior, being changed to a simple circular track rather than an arena.

GAME BOY
1996

"We used an external programmer for it, John Williams," says Mev Dinc, of the Game Boy version. "He was brilliant. John also did *First Samurai* on the C64, which was amazing." Impressively, this version packed in almost everything from its console cousins, although it can be hard to distinguish the cars from the track.

PLAYSTATION
1996

"Doing almost like a straight-ish conversion obviously didn't do justice to the PlayStation version," highlights Mev. "We should have really started from scratch. It wasn't an all-out proper 3D racer, although we did use a 3D engine. It got quite a good reception, but it should have been much better, to be honest."

» [PlayStation] The 32-bit versions of the game feature a short fun intro that highlights *Street Racer*'s wackiness.

ALLISTER BRIMBLE

THE TALENTED SOUND ARTIST REVEALS HOW HE MADE STREET RACER'S CATCHY TUNES

What did you work on before *Street Racer*?

My main work was on the Amiga, and most of the big titles were for Team17: games such as *Project X*, *Alien Breed* and *Super Frog*. I then moved onto the SNES, doing *Lawnmower Man* for Grandslam Entertainment.

How did you get involved with *Street Racer* and Vivid Image?

At the time I was one of the only suppliers of Super Nintendo music, having first purchased sound drivers from David Whittaker, who subsequently went off to America to work at Electronic Arts. Virgin Games had also recently written a sound driver for me for the game *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*. It was amazing and could do pretty much anything, including real-time synth sounds, allowing much richer content in a tiny amount of memory. Mev Dinc, the owner and main coder at Vivid Image, then contacted me, having heard about my work for Virgin Games.

What were your inspirations for the game's soundtrack?

I was very much inspired by Tim Follin's work on games such as *LED Storm* on the Amiga. His guitars and jazzy chords were the perfect combination in which to make catchy tunes that don't get boring in the long run.

Were there any particular difficulties on *Street Racer*?

The Super Nintendo, whilst having eight channels of audio, only had 64GB of RAM that you could use to store songs, so my compositions and samples had to be very compact indeed. I used real-time generated synth melody lines in order to save RAM. Part of the problem was that you ended up using very low sample rates for extremely low-fi sound. I found that you could get round this, however, by keeping the percussion samples at the highest rate, thus giving a reasonable hi-fi experience. I think we also ended up swapping in banks of sound from ROM in order to make each tune a bit more unique.

What have you been doing since?

After *Street Racer* I moved onto games such as *RollerCoaster Tycoon* for the PC and *Driver* for the PlayStation, and also then moved heavily into the handheld videogame market. I still work full-time providing audio for today's games.

SATURN
1996

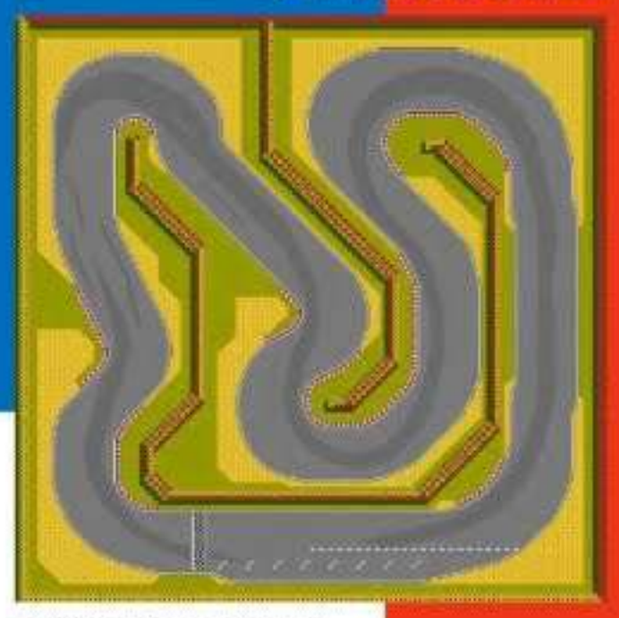
The Saturn port was essentially identical to the PlayStation version – and one crazy feature that they both shared was an eight-player split-screen mode using two multitaps. "60 frames a second, too," notes Mev. The 32-bit versions also featured an animated intro as well as an unlockable secret character: Rabbit.

AMIGA
1997

"It was really crazy," says Mev about the decision to port *Street Racer* to the Amiga so late in the computer's lifetime. "I mean, we shouldn't have really done it!" Guildhall published the game as a budget title, and it was based on the Mega Drive version rather than the PlayStation/Saturn one or the superior SNES original.

PC
1997

The DOS version is the same as the PlayStation and Saturn ports – and like those versions, it features a Micro Mode, whereby the game is turned into an overhead racer a la *Micro Machines*. Two more conversions – for the Game Gear and Sega 32X – were also in development, but were never released.



[SNES] Here's a top-down look at Helmut's track. As you'd expect it's designed to make use of his abilities.

[SNES] Surf Sister's aquatic-themed track reminds us of a certain *Super Mario Kart* stage.

▶ 60 frames a second, which was amazing."

Street Racer was shown for the first time at the summer CES show in Chicago in June 1994, and it received a rapturous reception. "Even Nintendo were gobsmacked," recalls Mev. "They couldn't believe it – they kept coming around, taking notes. And the game attracted so much attention. I think we were like the most talked about launch game at the time, along with *Donkey Kong Country*. As it happens, those games were published together, more or less. And *Donkey Kong Country* was number one, and then *Street Racer* was number two for, I think, eight to ten weeks or something, which was amazing." Mev reckons the SNES game sold around 400,000 units in all.

And achieving *Street Racer*'s incredible speed and four-player mode without the need for an expensive DSP chip meant Mev had room to negotiate with Ubisoft when it came to Vivid Image's royalty payments. "I saved $3 from the cartridge price, which allowed me to ask Ubisoft for a $3 royalty – and we got that."

> "LOOKING BACK ON IT, IF I WERE TO CHANGE ANYTHING IT WOULD PROBABLY BE THE TRACK LAYOUT AND THE CORNERS"
>
> Mev Dinc

The lack of DSP chip did mean that *Street Racer* had to forgo a few of the more fancy effects seen in *Super Mario Kart*. For example, whereas *SMK* has pipes and other furniture sticking up at the side of the road, *Street Racer* is relatively flat and featureless. And although Mev doesn't think sacrifices like this took away from the gameplay, he does think some of the track design could be improved. "Looking back on it, if I were to change anything it would probably be the track layout and the corners. We had some jaggedy edges around the track, and when you run into them you could you could get stuck a little bit, which caused frustration."

After the SNES game's success, Vivid Image spent a long time working on ports to other systems (check out 'Conversion Capers' at the top of these pages). "Ubisoft wanted to do the game on as many platforms as possible," says Mev. "I was really reluctant to do it. We really stretched our resources and time unnecessarily." The multiple conversions may partly explain why it was four years before Vivid Image's next game, *SCARS*, showed up in 1998. "Effectively [*SCARS*] was going to be the sequel to *Street Racer*," explains Mev. "But Ubisoft didn't want to call it *Street Racer*, so we ended up with something completely different."

SCARS met with a fairly mediocre critical reception, despite praise for its graphics. "We made a huge mistake by making the tracks very small and tight, and it made the gameplay really frustrating," laments Mev. "And I'm really sad about it because it could have been a huge game. I don't know how we failed to stop that from happening. So I completely blame myself. I shouldn't have let it go."

The game's reception partly led to Ubisoft parting ways with Vivid Image, but then Eidos came along with an offer to publish *Street Racer 2*. Vivid Image set to work on the PlayStation sequel – and it was around halfway complete when Eidos swung the axe on development. "It's such a shame actually, I really wanted to do *Street Racer 2*," says Mev. "I wanted to a proper 3D racing game with combat. Unfortunately, the timing was really against us, because it was the end of PlayStation, and Eidos decided to concentrate on PlayStation 2 and canned the PlayStation version. We had more characters, we had more combat elements, it was a better racing engine. Overall, it was a much better game." ✱

DIGITAL DESTINATIONS

WE REVISIT SOME OF VIDEOGAMES' MOST ICONIC CITIES AND TOWNS TO EXPLORE WHAT MAKES THEM SPECIAL

Words By Paul Walker-Emig

Our love of videogames is so often connected to the virtual places they allow us to inhabit. After all, this is what videogames can do that other mediums can't: allow us to live in a fictional space. Videogames cities and towns are perhaps the most powerful expression of this. It is in these spaces where we are given the opportunity to see a society in action. They speak to us – neglected districts tell a story of social inequality, architecture reveals a city's history, borders and boundaries gesture to its power structures, locations reflect real places we are familiar with back at us, offering an opportunity to anchor and orient ourselves around them, as we do with real landmarks.

Konstantinos Dimopoulos, who has turned his PhD in urban planning and geography towards urban design in videogames, tells us that while a convincing virtual city needs to feel believable, this doesn't mean it has to replicate real cities, rather, the dynamics that "makes cities tick". He says developers need to figure out what makes "these spatial expressions of society cities. What makes them fascinating, exciting, and desirable. If they understand, adapt or replicate their fundamental structures and processes".

"If they capture and reinterpret their dynamism, spectacle and vibrancy, they can craft utterly unique and weird places that will feel real," Konstantinos continues.

The cities in this list are examples of places that have done just that. We aim not only to revisit these memorable places but, through them, to explore what makes a videogame city impactful and compelling enough for them to remain lodged in our minds.

WELCOME TO

RACOON CITY

RESIDENT EVIL 2 INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

That a city *should* be packed with people going about their business is precisely what makes Racoon City such an unsettling place. When we first stepped in to one of the PlayStation's most memorable locales back in 1998, what we found instead was a city abandoned, broken and burning. This might be any city: it has delicatessens and petrol stations, parking garages and basketball courts, alleyways and courtyards. That familiarity makes it a fantastic location for a horror title. We've all walked streets at night with no one else around, and perhaps felt a little uneasy as we take a shortcut through an alleyway, or found ourselves nervously crossing the exact kind of dishevelled basketball court that can be found in the game. Racoon City plays on those fears and realises the worst of our imaginations by punctuating those moments of tense loneliness with lurching zombies out for your flesh. Its impressively detailed and evocative prerendered backgrounds still hold up today and its vision of a broken society – perhaps best expressed in making a symbol of stability in the form of the police station the centrepiece of a place torn apart by chaos – still has the ability to chill, especially when viewed in the 2019 *Resident Evil 2* remake.

» [PlayStation] Racoon City feels familiar, which makes its zombie outbreak more unsettling. It could happen in your own hometown.

» [PlayStation] Though the majority of the game is set indoors, these outside excursions are terrifying because there are many more zombies around.

» [Arcade] You can really feel the grime and sweat of Metro City. You might want to clean yourself up after playing through it, mind.

WELCOME TO

METRO CITY

» [Arcade] You'll get to visit every aspect of Metro City, from its dangerous subway system, to high-rise apartments.

You might say that Metro City is 'just' a backdrop for the side-scrolling beat-'em-up action of 1989's *Final Fight*, but you would be vastly underselling the work that background art is doing in the process. The early sections of the game in the slum and subway, with their smashed windows and rampant graffiti, provide an evocative representation of urban decay, with the game cleverly contrasting that to the glistening high-rise towers you can see in the background. Just that quick glimpse tells you this is a city of inequality and injustice. When you move into the West Side and characters start to fill the background, you get a sense of the dynamism and energy typical of big city night life, and you end up in the wealthy Uptown area, serving as a symbol of money, corruption and power. This journey captures so much of the feel of a modern metropolis and tells you a lot about its social dynamics. ▶

» [PC] Novigrad is the biggest city in the *Witcher*'s world, made up of several districts from the mucky lower areas to the ornate affluent districts.

JAKUB SZAMAŁEK

REDANIA • PONTAR DELTA

WELCOME TO THE FREE CITY OF NOVIGRAD

THE WITCHER 3

» [PC] The streets in the lower areas are populated with strumpets and religious fanatics, as well as people going about their daily business.

Many videogame cities have to gesture towards scale, asking the player to fill in the blanks. Novigrad is not one of those cities. Dwarfing every other location in the game, this is a place both big enough and well-designed enough to feel like a real town. We ask *The Witcher 3*'s principle writer Jakub Szamalek what he feels accounts for the city's believability.

"I think the key factor is density," Jakub replies. "There's a lot going on in Novigrad: the market square is filled with merchants, pilgrims fill the narrow streets, street urchins plan their next prank in a narrow alley behind a tavern, dock workers carry crates across slippery cobbled streets. Putting so many NPCs in one location was a technical challenge, but we were determined to get it right."

Novigrad feels familiar to anyone who has visited old European cities, and Jakub explains that is accounted for by its inspirations. "We picked medieval Amsterdam as our starting point – a bustling, busy port town," he explains. "We looked towards other European cities, too – for example, the wooden crane tower dominating Novigrad's waterfront is based on an iconic building from Gdansk, the so called Brama Zuraw." However, it was also important to ensure the city was consistent with the fiction. "We wanted to make sure that Novigrad makes sense within the *Witcher* universe – so before we designed the massive walls surrounding the city, we looked at the geography of the wider region to determine what kind of stone would have been used as building material."

In creating such a vast space, we wondered whether the team had any concerns about players getting lost. "Yes," Jakub responds, "but, to an extent, that was also our goal. We wanted to create a city which would overwhelm you at first, where you can get lost, which invites you to explore. Having said that, we didn't want to frustrate our players! So, we made sure that each district has recognisable structures which can serve as a waypoint. The fact that Novigrad is located on a hill also helped – once you climbed the top, you could see the city below you and figure out where you want to go."

WELCOME TO ANTESCHER

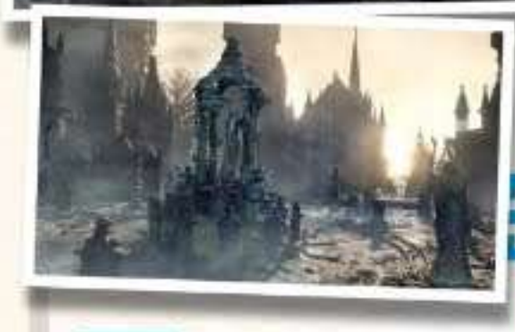
ANT ATTACK

***Ant Attack* is an isometric game in which you have to find your significant other and guide them to safety while being pursued by giant ants.** It takes place in Antescher – an obvious reference to MC Escher – a city which has an impressive sense of atmosphere, especially for something created within the limits of the power of a ZX Spectrum back in 1983. It works because the city does not rely on realism but instead works with impressionism, creating a place which has the feel of a ruined city that makes sense within the context of a post-giant-ant disaster.

Before appearing in *Pokémon Gold, Silver & Crystal*, *Pokemon FireRed & LeafGreen* and *Pokemon HeartGold & SoulSilver*, Saffron City made its debut in *Pokémon Red & Blue*. Creating a city that's meant to feel like the fictional Kanto region's version of Tokyo is no easy feat on the Game Boy, but Saffron City does an admirable job. The city is dominated by Silph Co's skyscraper HQ at its centre, but, unlike many of the other locations in the game, also has plenty of houses to support the illusion that this is a busy metropolis. Further emphasising the scale of Saffron City is the bucking of the otherwise observed trend of one Gym per city. Saffron City has two: an optional Fighting type Gym and the Saffron Gym proper, where you have to defeat Psychic type Pokémon to earn your Pokémon League badge.

» [GBA] Saffron City has been remade multiple times, featuring again in *Pokémon Gold & Silver*, *FireRed & LeafGreen* (pictured), and *HeartGold & SoulSilver*.

[PS4] Yharnam is already unsettling, but it's also infested with unseen horrors that are revealed as you play *Bloodborne*.



WELCOME TO YHARNAM BLOODBORNE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

If you've ever wondered if it's possible for something to be both beautiful and terrifying at the same time, look no further than Yharnam. With its cobbled streets and wrought iron fences, it draws on Victorian London. Yet it is the imposing Gothic spires that loom over the skyline, and the intricate and disturbing statues that watch over you, that best set the tone of this place of unknowable horror. You can feel its history, the layers that have built up as the city has grown and changed on its path to becoming the nightmare it is when you enter it. This layering of a sense of past through architecture and topography is complemented by snippets of story about the history of Yharnam that sparingly gesture towards the events of its past – an approach that's typical of FromSoftware and, we'd argue, far more effective than the Wiki-esque lore-dumps that games are prone to. As if that wasn't enough, Yharnam has an incredible sense of atmosphere. Amongst an already intimidating landscape, wisps of fog, faint screams in the distance and the ramblings of madmen combine to create an oppressive ambiance fitting for a place that exists to unsettle those of us who dare to hunt there.

WELCOME TO MIDGAR FINAL FANTASY VII

The *Final Fantasy* series has been home to many stunning locations over the course of its long history, but none are more famous, nor had as much of an impact, as Midgar. The power dynamics of the city are written into its very design, telling you everything you need to know about who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed. The city is laid out in a large circle. At its centre, the headquarters of the power company Shinra rises into the sky, dominating everything below. Lining the edge of the eight plates that radiate out from the HQ are gigantic chimneys that spew smoke from the company's Mako Reactors into the sky, a signal towards the Shinra Company's disregard for the natural world and the game's broader environmental themes. Underneath these plates lie the city's downtrodden and disregarded in slums blocked from sunlight (and, if you're following the city's obvious symbolism, hope) by the brutal and uncaring capitalism that has enclosed them both systemically and literally. We discover that these poor districts – named Sector 1, Sector 2, and so on – once had names that have been forgotten, a symbolic gesture towards the way that Shinra has crushed theses communities and their culture in the process of creating a dystopic police state. That *Final Fantasy VII* is able to tell us all this through its design of Midgar is a testament to what a cleverly conceived city it is.

[PC] The alien Combine structures can be seen erected around City 17, like an infection.

WELCOME TO CITY 17

The first of many well-judged moves *Half-Life 2* makes with City 17 is to let you experience it not as a videogame level, but as a city. You arrive by train in a run-down station and immediately get the sense of being surveilled as a drone floats above and takes a snapshot of you. A video plays on a big screen on the wall, the city's administrator Wallace Breen talking about what a fine city you've arrived in as a guard roughly hassles a citizen, presenting a contrast that tells you he's a liar. You experience the city's oppressiveness first-hand as you are herded through fenced areas like an animal, then find yourself being bullied by a guard who knocks a can to the floor and makes you pick it up. In this short introduction to the game, you learn so much about the kind of city this is.

City 17's architecture is heavily inspired by Eastern Europe, taking in elements of Sofia in Bulgaria, Budapest in Hungary, and others – a choice to draw on those cities' history of invasion and oppression. City 17 adds to that with a new layer of architecture – the jutting sci-fi structures of the alien Combine forces that now control the city, tearing into its buildings and streets, appearing almost as wounds on the very fabric of the place. This is a conscious attempt to represent the aggression and violence of the alien occupation in the very texture of the city, and it works fantastically.

Crucially, however, *Half-Life 2* never forgets about the people that live in City 17. It is your constant exposure to their sadness, their sacrifices, their solidarity and their humanity, that gives this oppressive dystopia its sense of tragedy, and that gives you a stake in attempting to liberate it.

Welcome to Union City, Beneath A Steel Sky International Airport

Before *Final Fantasy VII* literalised its social dynamics in the city of Midgar in 1997, *Beneath A Steel Sky* made the same move in 1994 with its depiction of Union City. Here, different economic groups are confined to different sectors, with the richest at the lowest points of the city and the poorest at the top, trapping them in an area they are unable to exit. Rendered in a memorable art style overseen by comic book legend Dave Gibbons, the city taps into many fears we still have today. This is a place where citizens have gradually had their rights eroded and are now ruled by an AI in an oppressive surveillance state. Theoretically, it's left a better place by the time you reach the end of the game, but we'll see how that turns out when we revisit it in the upcoming sequel, *Beyond A Steel Sky*.

Welcome to Inaba, Persona 4

Inaba is a small, quiet Japanese rural town unprepared for the spate of strange murders that punctuate its peaceful facade and sets your protagonist and their friends off on a quest to find out who is behind them by visiting a surreal parallel TV world where they battle demons. Despite the darkness that looms over Inaba, there is something idyllic about it that makes you invested in returning it to a place where people can be safe. It evokes a sense of nostalgia and cosiness that makes you wish you could grow up there. That is in large part to the way the game connects you with its community. You meet friends at Yasogami High School, hang out together at Junes Department Store, become a part of the family at the Dojima household and down beef bowls with buddies in the shopping district. The game's focus on building relationships, both to advance the story and enhance your abilities, ensures that Inaba as a place is connected to the people you meet there. It's that sense of community that makes it such a pleasant place and sees it worm its way into your heart.

» [PC] The retro sci-fi aesthetic, as well as its underwater location, makes Rapture stick out as a setting.

Welcome To Rapture, BioShock

Spectacle can go a long way in making a location stick in the memory and Rapture certainly has that in spades. From the first moment you catch sight of the underwater city after descending in a bathysphere, its neon lights shining from skyscraper walls as whales and squids thread their way between them, you know you are in for a treat.

What makes Rapture such a compelling and coherent place, despite its fanciful location, is that it is built from an ideology. The city's creator, Andrew Ryan, is an avatar for Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy, prioritising rabid individualism and extreme laissez-faire capitalism over any concept of collective responsibility or solidarity. Rapture embodies that idea in its structure, its politics and its economy, portrayed by the superpower-granting compound of Adam, which individuals end up killing others for to extract it from their blood and realise an individual greatness they imagine themselves to be achieving, ultimately tearing the social fabric of the city apart.

The tensions, contradictions and conflicts inherent in Ryan's ideology explode to create a compelling dystopic vision, a story the city tells us of what was and what is, through its crazed inhabitants, smashed establishments, advertisements, and so on. That story is enhanced by the place's incredible atmosphere, perhaps best embodied in the haunting wails and clunking footsteps of the iconic Big Daddy creatures that echo through Rapture's ruins.

Despite all this horror, it is also clear that Rapture was, and sometimes still is, a beautiful place. The consistency of the ideas that underpin the city are mirrored in the consistency of its style. Rapture was built as an opulent Art Deco paradise, blending a Twenties and Thirties sensibility with sci-fi to create something that's both distinctive and stunning.

» [PC] You encounter Rapture after it has been laid to waste, but Andrew Ryan's ambition is still clear for all to see.

[PC] At the time, *GTA III*'s Liberty City was a revelation, and would influence many later open world games.

WELCOME TO LIBERTY CITY

GTAIV · GTAIII · GTAIV · GTAIII · GTAIV · GTAIII · GTAIV · GTAIII · GTAIV · GTAIII · GTAIV · GTAIII · GTAIV · GTAIII · GTAIV · GTAIII · GTAIV · GTAIII

OBBE VERMEIJ

Grand Theft Auto's parody of New York City, Liberty City, revolutionised open world gaming when it appeared in *GTA III* and came back to wow for a second time in *GTA IV*. Obbe Vermeij, who worked as technical director on *GTA III*, *Vice City*, *San Andreas* and *GTA IV*, tells us that Liberty City, and the cities to follow, represented a huge technical challenge.

"On the earlier games, the biggest problem with the city was the streaming," he says. "The memory of the PS2 wasn't big enough to contain all of the building and textures of the city. The solution was to load (stream) building models/textures from the CD as the player entered a certain area and remove these once the player had left. The problem is that the CD drive of the PS2 was slow. Even by placing the models strategically on the CD (building models that were near each other on the map should also be near each other on the CD to avoid unnecessary CD head movements) the game was not able to load the models quick enough when the player was driving a fast car through the city.

"If the player 'got ahead' of the streaming, the city would simply not be there, or you would only see very low-detail versions of the map. If you look at the map of *GTA III*, you'll notice there is a main drag on the start island (Portland). The main drag has a building on it halfway down the island. This building serves to slow the player down and was added quite late during development to help the streaming. We also increased air friction for cars at certain big roads travelling though busy parts of the city."

Given that the *GTA* games clearly pay heed to the locations they are based on, we wonder how much realism Rockstar attempted to capture when designing cities.

"The artists would plan the cities with gameplay in mind," Obbe affirms. "They would talk to the level designers and the producer to make sure the layout would work for the game. At Rockstar North, we always prioritised gameplay over anything else.

"*GTA IV*'s map consists of islands because it adds variety," Obbe continues. "Bridges, docks, distinct islands, water to use speedboats, etc. Multiple islands makes for a better game, so we went that way."

WELCOME TO SOUTHTOWN

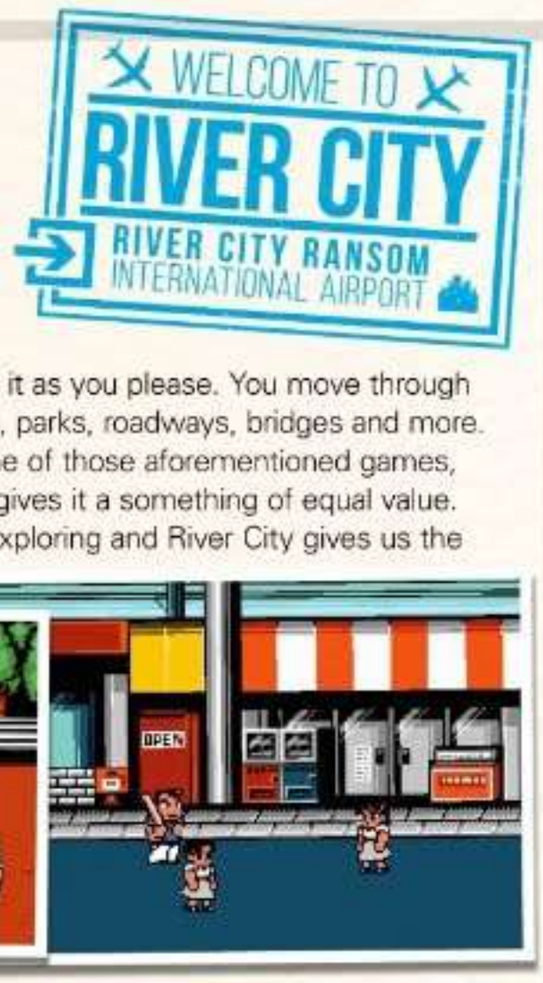
FATAL FURY: KING OF FIGHTERS

***Fatal Fury* gave the globetrotting structure that *Street Fighter II* made famous its own twist by zeroing in on a single city and having you battle competitors from across its various districts instead.** Each of its stages are full of intricate detail and packed with energy and movement – like The Happy Park where beautiful colonial townhouses serve as a backdrop to the baying crowd cheering on your fight, or West Subway, where trains zoom past a packed street of restaurants. A nice touch was the way stages would often change as you moved into the second round, the lighting showing a turn to dusk to give the stage a different feel, for example.

WELCOME TO SEATTLE 2050 SHADOWRUN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

***Shadowrun*'s vision of Seattle achieves just what you'd want from a piece of fiction projecting the trajectory of a real place into the future.** It retains elements of the architecture of today, making it relatable, and augments this with a sci-fi style that signals that we are in the future. Drawing on cyberpunk influences, the city feels rough, grimy and dingy – a place appropriately dangerous to guide your party of badass samurai, deckers and shamans through.

Shadowrun's future version of Seattle is divided into multiple districts for you to travel to in the Mega Drive version, giving it the appropriate sense of urban sprawl. Downtown Seattle is where you'll find a host of corporation buildings and bars and the Penumbra District is an upmarket area for the rich, filled with important corporate buildings and high-class clubs. Seattle 2050 provides contrast to that with the Redmond Barrens slums and the black market shops of the shady Puyallup Barrens.



River City holds something in common with genre-mates like *Final Fight*, *Double Dragon* and *Streets Of Rage* in that it serves as a backdrop for you to beat up goons with fists, bats and trash cans. River City is different in that you can explore it as you please. You move through residential areas, shopping streets, parks, roadways, bridges and more. It might not be as detailed as some of those aforementioned games, but the ability to traverse it freely gives it a something of equal value. Cities are places we are used to exploring and River City gives us the freedom to do that.

The city of Skara Brae in *The Bard's Tale* was an incredible achievement for 1985. A medieval-esque fantasy town populated by rogues, warriors, druids and monsters, the city was rendered in 3D graphics and laid out over what felt like a huge scale at the time, featuring multiple streets full of shops, temples, taverns and dungeons. Of course, by modern standards it's not all that big, nor very detailed, but Skara Brae nevertheless manages to create the impression of being a real place within the not insignificant limits of the technology developer Interplay was working with.

There are many things that make Dunwall a fantastic videogame city: its sense of atmosphere, the way *Dishonored*'s themes are embedded in its architecture and design, the distinctive art style in which it is rendered. What sticks out to us, though, is the way it favours intricacy and detail over scale, offering the player many ways to move through and experience it. We ask Arkane Studios' co-creative director Sébastien Mitton if the developer places a greater focus on intricacy in its city design.

"I could not say if it's equal or not, because it's a process that is done over time, starting with a satellite view, then zooming in gradually, until you end up designing a radiator cap!" he tells us. "But it is true that the same attention is given to the big picture, the history, the solidity and the coherence of a place, as there is to the way one draws a street, then an apartment on that street and so on.

"Another aspect to which I pay a lot of attention is the topography of the place. It's very difficult to craft a city on a slope, and it's not common to see that in game. But we feel it gives a unique feeling of organic canyons where you can lose yourself. It also helps the player to orient themselves because they have a better view of the city landmarks. It gives the feeling of an open world in a level-based game."

We ask Sébastien what kind of research goes into creating dense cities like those found in Arkane's *Dishonored* games. "Without distinguishing between Dunwall and Karnaca [from *Dishonored 2*], we do a lot of research, including periodical texts on the Black Death, paintings, documentaries, photos, and, of course, trips to selected destinations," he replies. "When the first ideas and research feels solid, I start thinking through the mind of different inhabitants of the city, location by location. First it's basic: rich, poor. Then I refine: loyal, traitor. Then per function: guards, workers etc. It really helps to think: 'I own this place, what do I want to see?'"

» [PC] Arkane's cities are crammed full of hidden details that tell their own stories.

WELCOME TO MELEE TOWN
THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND

It's the first location we visit in the iconic *Monkey Island* series and the perfect archetypal swashbuckling town for wannabe pirates. Melee Town is nestled in an island cove on the fictional Caribbean island Melee Island. During the opening of the game, as credits roll across the screen and we listen to some calypso-style music, we view the town from a distance seeing points of light romantically shining out into the night. Soon enough, we get into the town proper and meet its eccentric residents. Here you find the iconic Scumm Bar, where beer stains on the wall hint at old bar-room brawls and crusty captains berate our hero Guybrush in a fashion he is going to have to get used to. Walk across its cobblestone streets and you'll also find a jail, a church, a dodgy guy with a parrot on a shoulder selling stuff out his coat and, of course, a voodoo practitioner operating out of the House Of Mojo. What more can a prospective pirate wish for? It's the perfect place to get you into an adventurous mood and get you on board with Guybrush's goal to get a ship and see what else is out there.

WELCOME TO YOKOSUKA
SHENMUE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

If you ever wondered what makes *Shenmue's* Yokosuka feel like a real place, part of that can be attributed to the fact that it kind of is. *Shenmue* doesn't just borrow the name of the real city of Yokosuka, or try to capture its spirit, but goes so far as to replicate real streets and shop fronts to an astonishing level of detail. This virtual version of the city is far more than a photocopy of the real thing, however. *Shenmue* situates you in the city's community. Protagonist Ryo is, after all, a resident there, so the people who you talk to around the city often know who you and your family are; the game wants you to feel like a part of this place. What really makes Yokosuka stand out, however, is the way it tries to simulate the dynamics of a city. Residents have a routine, going about their daily business irrespective of what you're up to, shops have a closing time, buses keep to a schedule, bars open as the evening closes in, changing the atmosphere of the streets. It's this sense of a place in motion that really distinguishes Yokosuka from the videogame cities that came before it.

» [PC] *Assassin's Creed II* movement system makes navigating the streets and canals of Venice a parkour-charged thrill.

WELCOME TO VENICE
ASSASSIN'S CREED II

***Assassin's Creed* has become such a regular feature of the gaming landscape that it's easy to forget just how much of an impact *Assassin's Creed II* had when it was released in 2009.** The game's recreation of Renaissance Venice is a treat for history buffs, featuring real locations such as the Basilica Of Santa Maria Gloriosa Dei Frari, the Piazza San Marco and the church of San Giobbe. The city had a sense of energy about it too, with, what were for the time, relatively large numbers of citizens roaming the streets, offering opportunities for protagonist Ezio to hide in plain site among them. While these things are a part of its appeal, it is not the game's impressive recreation of real historical architecture or the people that walk its streets that makes this game's city special. Rather, it is the way that it made its architecture a playground in a way we'd never seen in a game before. *Assassin's Creed II*'s improved parkour-inspired movement offered a fresh and exhilarating way to move through a city. From the dynamism of dashing across rooftops, to the moments of calm where you would take in a spectacular view after scaling one of the game's towering landmarks, this city was a liberating and rewarding place to explore. ✱

» [PC] For a game that ends with you swordfighting with the Pope, *Assassin's Creed II* does at least have some wonderfully faithful cities.

Hardware Heaven

Xbox fact

■ Sega manufactured an arcade version of the Xbox, called Chihiro. Unlike the consumer model, it had 128MB RAM and used GD-ROM instead of DVD-ROM for game distribution.

PROCESSOR: 32-BIT INTEL PENTIUM III CPU (733 MHZ)

GRAPHICS: NVIDIA GEFORCE 3-BASED NV2A (233MHZ), UP TO 21.9 MILLION POLYGONS PER SECOND (WITH TWO TEXTURES, LIGHTING, Z BUFFER, ALPHA AND FOG)

AUDIO: NVIDIA MCPX, 64 3D SOUND CHANNELS

OPERATING SYSTEM: CUSTOM XBOX OS

RAM: 64MB DDR SDRAM

MEDIA: DVD-ROM

ESSENTIAL GAME

Ninja Gaiden Black

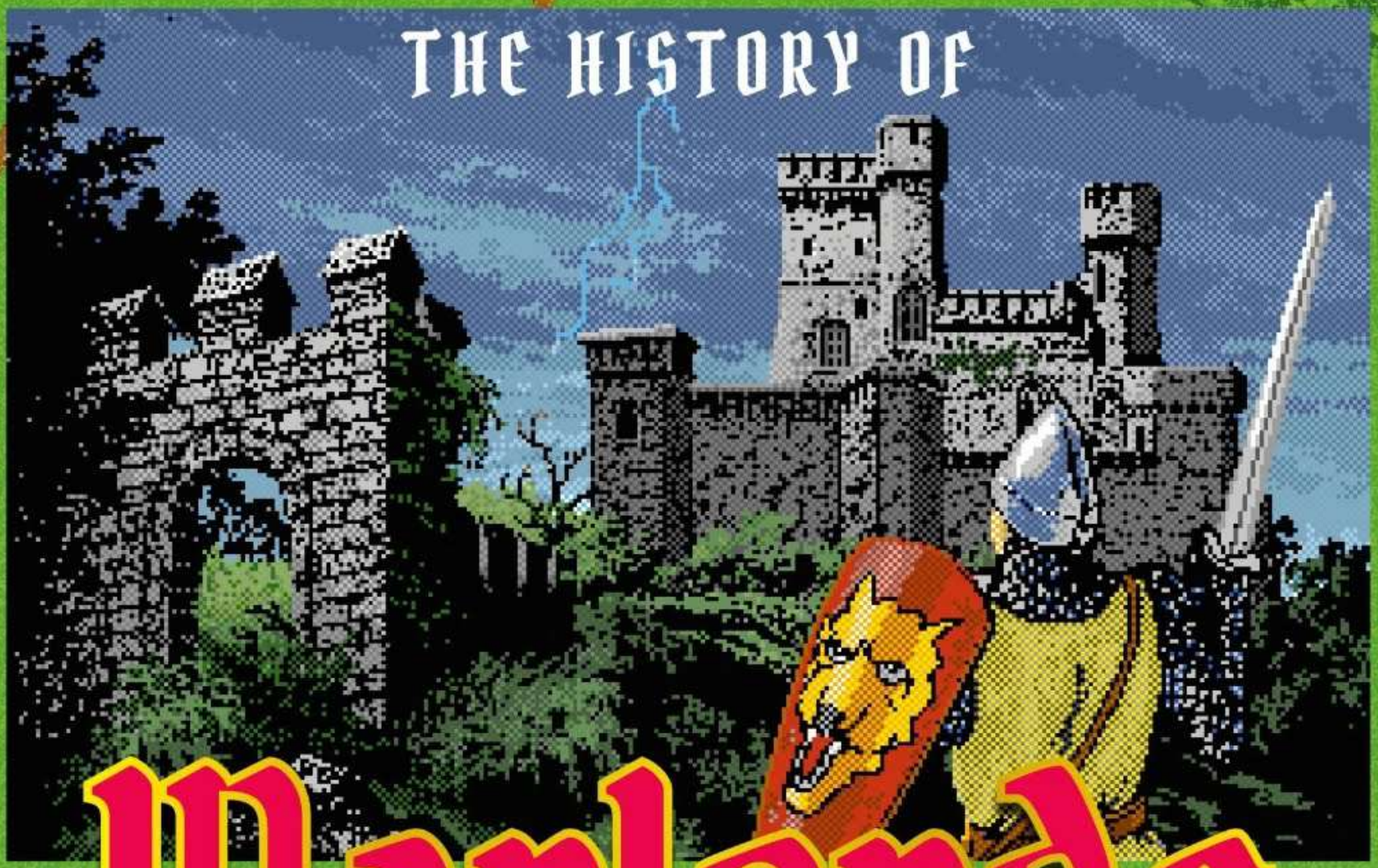
During the early part of the Noughties, Tomonobu Itagaki's Team Ninja was creating amazing games which ably demonstrated the power of Microsoft's console. As good as the *Dead Or Alive* games are, we have to give the nod to *Ninja Gaiden,* an epic hack-and-slash adventure which revived Ryu Hayabusa for the 3D age. As well as being visually stunning, the game offered gory combat that was incredibly smooth and satisfying, while providing a ferocious challenge. The enhanced *Black* version contains new enemies and additional difficulty modes, as well as the original DLC challenges, and it is the version to go for.

Xbox

» **MANUFACTURER:** Microsoft » **YEAR:** 2001
» **COST:** £299 (launch), £25+ (today, boxed), £20+ (today, unboxed)

It's fair to say that the original Xbox isn't a particularly pretty piece of gaming hardware. It was designed by an American company with an uncool image, and its decidedly unsubtle aesthetic reflected that. The system is large, heavy and black. It's got a massive X across the top of it, with a bright green plastic blob in the middle. Compared to the striking silver X-shaped prototype model, the retail Xbox was dull and uninspired.

Of course, what the Xbox lacked in exterior beauty, it made up for in power. Microsoft's debut console was a beast of a machine, which utilised the fixed performance profile of a console to unleash the full potential of the PC parts that powered it. The forward-thinking design included Ethernet for broadband connections as standard, and a hard disk for a variety of purposes including saving games, downloading additional content and in-game caching. Of course, powerful hardware comes at a price, and Microsoft was losing money on each system even before a dramatic £100 price cut just months after launch. The Xbox never ended up turning a profit, but it did fulfil its strategic objective of securing Microsoft's place in the console market for many years to come. ★



Warlords

Though it might not have outlasted some of the big names in strategy gaming, Warlords was at the precipice of a burgeoning genre. We explore the history of this forgotten champion

WORDS BY ADAM BARNES

Steve Fawkner has overseen *Warlords* throughout the franchise's history.

Some games are irreversibly connected to the genres they belong to. If you think of an FPS, you'll likely think of *Doom*, *GoldenEye* or more recently *Call Of Duty*. If you think of platformers, your mind will conjure up the image of *Mario* or *Sonic*. MMOs are *World Of Warcraft* or *Everquest*, fighting games are *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*, while RTS games are typified by *StarCraft* or *Command & Conquer*. If we asked you to name a turn-based strategy game, you'd likely say *Civilization*, *X-COM* or *Heroes Of Might & Magic*. And yet, despite earning a good deal of success and notoriety, you most likely wouldn't think of *Warlords*, even if the game and its design did predate a lot of the big names that came after it.

"I think it was about 1987 when I started writing the game," says Steve Fawkner, the creator of the *Warlords* series. "It was partly based on the *Empire* game by Mark Baldwin over at White Wolf Productions and partly based on the *Dragons Of War* board game by TSR." *Empire* is a fairly noteworthy mention there, since it – alongside the sci-fi themed *Reach For The Stars* – went on to be considered the originators of the subgenre of strategy game known as '4X'. The term would go on to define the particular gameplay of the likes of *Civilization*, *Master Of Orion* and most other empire-growing strategy games that came after it. But in 1987, the specifics of this subgenre had yet to be refined. "I'd just got an Amiga and I'd bought a 40MB hard drive, and I could not figure out how I was going to fill up 40MB. I thought that I had learnt enough about art and enough about coding that I could probably do the whole thing myself, and get a nice looking game with some nice art that runs on this new technology."

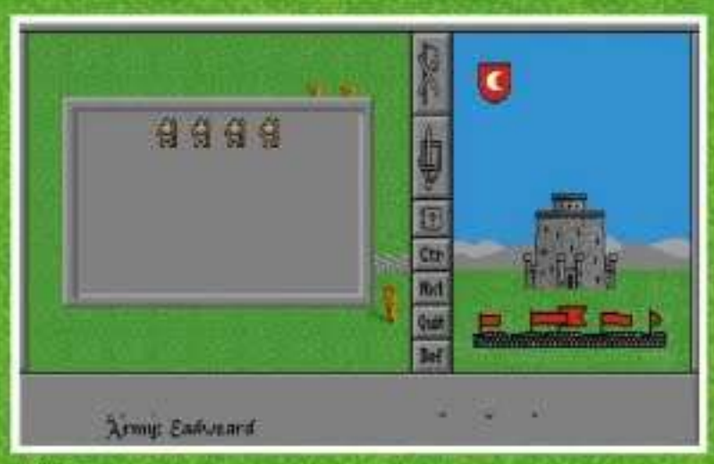
It was partway through the development of what would become *Warlords* that Steve felt

« [PC] There was only one map in the original game, but the varying difficulties and the different start positions (and challenges) of each faction meant that there was plenty of replayability.

> "They threw it in the bin and sent me a polite rejection letter. But about three days after they had done that, the president of SSG, Ian Trout, his son found some floppy discs in the bin, plugged them into his Amiga and started playing it"
>
> STEVE FAWKNER

there was enough quality that he wanted to pursue something beyond the hobby releases he'd been making up until then. "I had about three games on the go at the time, and I particularly liked this one, and about six months into development I thought that I wouldn't go public domain with this one but instead I'd try to find a publisher." Steve's games had primarily been text-based adventures, but throughout them all, he focused on a certain amount of permanence that involved a hero character that grew as the player progressed. "But I'd never really worked on a strategy game before," says Steve, which he admits meant he "had no idea what I was doing" when it came to developing the strategic layer of the game. "The process was partly copying what I'd seen in *Empire* and partly copying a board game, but I kind of approached it from a graphical point of view. And so I designed the main game screen first and said: 'Okay, I've got to fit a map into this, how many pixels do I have for a minimap?' Then, 'Okay, that's the size that the map will be. How many tiles can I fit on the screen?'"

The core gameplay from the very beginning had human and AI-controlled factions expanding across a map, exploring for treasures and battling one another for ultimate victory: your bread and butter 4X game, before that was what would define the subgenre. For Steve, who was living in Melbourne, Australia, there was a smart choice of publisher to aim for. "I did know a guy at Strategic Studies Group and I sent a game up to them to look at," recalls Steve. SSG was already well-known in the industry for its electronic wargames, and in fact had developed *Reach For The Stars*. "They initially hated it," says Steve, "they ▶



« [PC] The combat itself is all automated, but there's a core set of mechanical rules underneath it all to determine the victor.

« [PC] Heroes were a significant aspect of the combat, and could be enhanced over the course of the game to become serious threats to any army.

Spanning The Spin-offs

Key games that aren't in the main series

Warlords: Battlecry

Turn-based strategy had a tough go of it in the mid-Nineties after the likes of *Warcraft* and *Command & Conquer*, but Steve's interest in the genre ultimately lead to this RTS spin-off. *Battlecry* was actually fairly successful, had three games in the series and added to the *Warlords* lore.

Puzzle Quest

As perhaps the biggest success story to come out of the *Warlords* franchise, most people will be familiar with the title or at least its innovative gameplay that merges match-three puzzle gaming with RPG elements. It was a revelation in 2007 at the time of *Puzzle Quest: Challenge Of The Warlords'* release, and since then many, many copycats have taken its place in the world of casual mobile gaming.

Stranger Than Faction

Investigating the key players of Warlords

Sirians

The Sirians are your de facto Human race, and all that typically entails for any strategy game. There's no great advantage to playing as the Sirians, but no disadvantage either.

The Horse Lords

This human faction is likely inspired by *LOTR*'s Rohan nation, but on a gameplay level it's perfect for blitz attacks with faster movement on roads and the plains.

Seletine Empire

Another human faction, and one whose lore was expanded to turn it into a cruel expansionist. It was the only faction that focused on naval supremacy as its primary tactic.

Dwarves

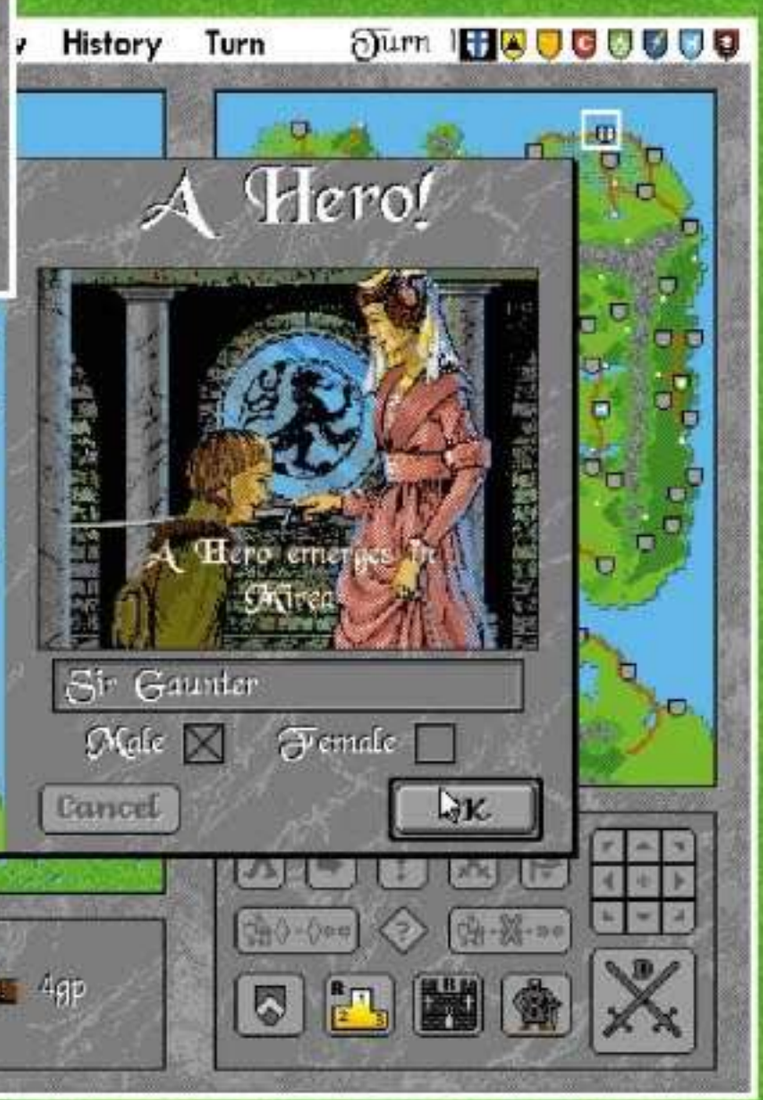
As is typical of this race, dwarves are heavy hitters despite their short stature. In *Warlords* the race is imbued with the bonus of fighting and moving more effectively on hills.

[PC] The interface had been given a huge upgrade with *Warlords II*, which undoubtedly made the game more manageable to play.

▶ threw it in the bin and sent me a polite rejection letter. But about three days after they had done that, the president of SSG, Ian Trout, his son found some floppy discs in the bin, plugged them into his Amiga and started playing it." After seeing Ian's son's interest in the game, SSG changed its tone and signed a deal with Steve. He would produce the game from his own company Infinite Interactive, working as part of an alliance of sorts with SSG – an alliance that lasted for almost the length of the *Warlords* franchise.

Steve admits that this was hugely advantageous for the game. SSG's experience touched on numerous factors of game development, ultimately leading to "quite a few significant changes" that helped to round out the *Warlords* experience. "SSG had published a lot of strategy games, and one of the guys there – Roger Keaton – was a really great AI programmer. He said that my AI kind of sucked and he would rewrite it, but that he needed me to help him understand how everything worked. So we worked pretty closely together – me in Melbourne, him in Sydney, sending floppy discs back and forth."

This would go on to become one of the most praised aspects of the game when it released in 1990 for DOS, Amiga and Mac. Each of the eight factions could be controlled by either a human player or the AI, and the latter was able to act rather realistically – even down to sometimes being ineffective with its cash. However, the big focus was on the 'hot seat' multiplayer gaming – this was largely a time before the internet, after all. "For me gaming has always been a social thing, and so with *Warlords* even before the deal was signed with SSG, we would sit down with my friends watching football and we would take turns playing. We would play drinking games with it: if Black captured a city you would have to take a sip, and if Red captured a city you would have to finish your drink. Multiplayer gaming was



[PC] Heroes could be male or female in this sequel. It didn't really have an effect on the gameplay, but it was a novel addition all the same.

Orcs

This is a faction intended to focus on expansion, and comes with wolf riders at an early level to facilitate that. This means typically they'll be fighting on multiple fronts.

Elves

Forest specialists kitted out with archers, the elf races are more about defending than expanding. Some games made the distinction between high elves and dark elves.

Giants

As you might expect from such a race, the giants – or the storm giants, as they're also known as – are slow but tough warriors. They're heavy-hitting and tanky, but take longer to produce.

Dark Lord

Essentially Sauron, the Dark Lord works in much the same way by quietly building up a large army in isolation before unleashing the masses onto the battle-torn map.

Lich King

Introduced in the second game, the Lich King was the 'evil' equivalent of the Dark Lord (who did not appear). The word 'litch' is derived from the Old English word for corpse.

> "For me, gaming has always been a social thing, and so with Warlords even before the deal was signed with SSG, we would sit down with my friends watching football and we would take turns playing"
>
> STEVE FAWKNER

› [PC] A huge push for better lore and worldbuilding came alongside the third outing, leveraging the factions of the previous games.

› [PC] There were far more options when it came to map styles in *Warlords III*, which helped with the sense of variety.

always my sort of thing, so we always had that as part of the *Warlords* series."

While the art might have held the original release of *Warlords* back a little, the gameplay set about creating a core concept that Steve could build upon. And it was popular, too, ranking as one of the best strategy games of the decade – in the same decade that *Civilization* was released – and building up a fanbase that enjoyed its unique blend of RPG and strategy. "I knew it was good and I knew I really enjoyed playing it," says Steve, "but I was still really, really pleasantly surprised when other people thought the same. I remember seeing the first reviews come back in *Computer Gaming World* and *Dragon* magazine giving it five stars, and thinking, 'Oh wow, people really like it.' We were in the top of the most popular charts list at the back of CGW for many years, alongside *Civilisation* and *SimCity*. I was surprised because I didn't see myself in the same footing at the time as those other guys, my heroes."

The sequel took a little while to come about however. While a follow-up would typically only be a year or two behind the original release, with *Warlords II* that wasn't the case. "The first game was literally developed in my bedroom," says Steve, "a little tiny desk in a little tiny ten by ten room. When we went to *Warlords II*, we moved up a step: that was developed in my

The Four Xs

How Warlords helped set the groundwork for a genre

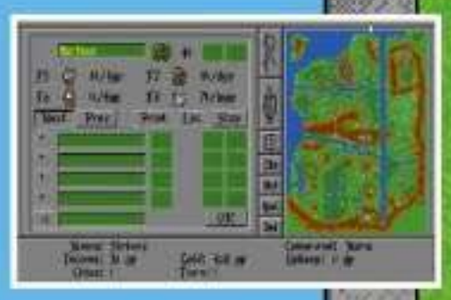
Explore

Key to any 4X game is the initial exploration, as players step out into an untamed land looking for fame and glory. With just one hero and one city, players in *Warlords* needed to search ruins, claim blessings from temples and fight neutral creatures and armies to grow in power.

Expand

With predetermined cities available for capture, it was necessary to expand your faction's control over the map by taking over as many locations as possible. Doing so gave you a larger income and a greater variety to your unit types.

Exploit



Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each unit type was crucial to success in *Warlords*. Some were stronger but slow, some could fly, others were better in forests or hills; the trick was understanding the situations you were about to face and to plan ahead.

Exterminate

As with most 4X games, pretty much the only goal was to be the last one standing. This changed in minor ways over *Warlords*' releases, but it was essentially always about conquering others and claiming the entire map for yourself.

▲ [PC] The types of units that were available in the third game had grown immensely over the originals, and many came with very specialised uses.

▶ lounge room, basically mostly by myself but with some more of the guys at SSG working with me at the time, and we had the services of a proper artist."

Before work on the sequel began, Steve fondly recalls the fan mail that he would receive regarding *Warlords* and the influence it had on his initial considerations for a sequel. "No one ever said anything bad, they liked stuff – it was very different to the internet! And so I was reacting for a little bit to that, saying, 'Oh, we should add this feature, we should add that feature.'" This soup of sound ideas ultimately left a bad taste in the mouth, and so about a year into its development the decision was made to keep the sequel much simpler. "I thought: 'Let's just throw it all out, we'll start again, we'll make kind of the same game but we'll add in neat streamlining features." This was where elements such as questing came in, to help guide the player, while the interface was given a much-needed overhaul. "I was very keen to make a scenario editor for *Warlords II*," adds Steve, "because I'd seen a couple of other games like *The Bard's Tale* coming out with scenario editors and then someone could make a *Lord Of The Rings* scenario that I could play."

Releasing in 1993 for DOS and then a year later on Mac, *Warlords II* really highlighted the qualities of its predecessor. Though it did little more than refine the core gameplay of the original, it did so with a greater degree of pizazz. Though it now had *Civilization* to compete with, it still managed to draw in a large base of fans. It was not without its changes to the original, however, and not all of them for the better. "We wanted to use lots of different maps in the second game," says Steve, which the team did. Numerous scenarios and greater variety to the stages added in extra replayability to the game but at the loss of familiarity. "In the first game, its world was actually the *D&D* campaign that I had been running for a few years. It was stuff that I had made up and it had a little bit of history. I think when a map has been developed organically like that, it carries a little gravitas and a little authenticity with it, and the players react to it, even if there isn't a story to it." Changing this in the sequel meant there was something missing, as Steve explains. "That was something I wanted to get back in *Warlords III*. I thought: 'Let's build a world and we'll set a story in this world and we can use it in other games.'"

Midway through the Nineties, SSG struggled to keep up with the slew of quality strategy games that were making it to the PC at the time. *Master Of Orion* released in 1993 – and with it the term '4X' – and things only became harder from there. SSG worked to release *Warlords II Deluxe* as a stopgap, leveraging existing work on *Warlords III* for a cash injection before Steve moved onto what would become the fully fledged third game.

"*Warlords III* was interesting because we had to integrate it with an internet service, which we hadn't even done before," he says, explaining that the new publisher of Red Orb Entertainment was very certain of the addition of online multiplayer. "That took quick a bit of time because they were writing the Red Orb Zone service as we were writing the game, so there was a lot of debugging on both ends. But we got there eventually, and I think that is what helped number three be a really big success. I think it's the biggest seller in the series." But this was the first time that Steve himself did not have

full control over the game, the popularity of the series having reached beyond him and the small team at SSG and instead his vision for what was needed became more crucial. "Suddenly I was a manager, and that was tricky for me. I had to learn to let go of things, I had to manage people, I had to be a reasonable human being."

The release of *Warlords III* in 1997 was a huge success for SSG, its enhancements like spells and custom teams adding interesting new elements to the series, while being playable over the internet was a massive plus for existing fans. It was at this point, however, that Steve and SSG wanted to mix things up: "We had signed up a game called *Warlords IV* with Red Orb immediately because *Warlords III* had been so successful, and I said, 'Can we just please make this one real-time?'" The publisher was happy for SSG to follow this route, especially considering the explosive popularity of the genre, and so that was where Steve spent most of his time in the early Noughties, developing *Warlords: Battlecry*, the franchise's real-time strategy spin-off. In the meantime, a turn-based equivalent was on the cards, developed by another studio before being passed back over to Steve and Infinite Interactive by Ubisoft, who had acquired the franchise after a long chain of company buyouts. "They gave us six months to make the game," says Steve. "We did three weeks of preproduction without touching any code, and then myself and the team just sat down and said, 'Go!' In six months, we finished it, we went into beta and it was released a couple of months later. We had all the art assets that the previous team had worked on, and we just had to figure out how to put it all together. None of the original design really survived." Despite the pride that Steve has in the team's ability and dedication in producing the game in such a short space of time, he admits that "there's no doubt that we rushed it", and this negatively affected the end result. "The gameplay sucked, it just wasn't the usual polished product that we would have gotten one of these games to. We added tactical combat because it had been promised by the other team, but it didn't really work very well." Though the game sold quite well, it was not the sort of *Warlords* release that fans had hoped for. "It just hadn't quite moved with the times," adds Steve. It was 2003 when *Warlords IV: Heroes Of Etheria* released and though Steve insists that it wasn't enough to kill the franchise, there hasn't been another one since. But that's not necessarily the end, especially with returning viability for strategy games. "We'll probably do another *Warlords* game someday," Steve teases, "I am very keen to do one."

> "Suddenly I was a manager, and that was tricky for me. I had to learn to let go of things, I had to manage people, I had to be a reasonable human being"
> STEVE FAWKNER

» [PC] The city view was likely inspired by *Civilisation*'s viewpoints, but it didn't add much to the gameplay.

» [PC] The visuals were a big focus for the *Warlords IV* team, which meant animated battles for the first time in the franchise's history.

» [PC] The main game view switched to an isometric setup with the fourth game, which was essentially the de facto PC game viewpoint at the time of its release.

The Magical Quest Starring Mickey Mouse

MODE 7 HEAVEN

» RETROREVIVAL

» SNES » 1992 » CAPCOM

One of my favourite Mega Drive platformers is *Castle Of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse*, a game I have completed countless times.

You could probably guess, then, that when I eventually moved over to the Super Nintendo Capcom's own *Mickey Mouse* game soon became one of my most desired games for the system. I was desperate for more Mickey, and I would religiously read games magazines, waiting for the newest scrap of information about it, as it looked absolutely sensational.

Eventually, my local import shop, Video Games Centre, received Japanese copies of the game and I hastily picked a copy up for a rather hefty £65 (pretty much an entire week's wages for me back then). Yes, it was expensive, but I didn't care as I *had* to own it. I rushed home as quickly as I could (it was a good 30-minute bus ride at the best of times) unpacked the game and hastily stuffed it into my SNES. Oh my goodness, it was glorious. Mickey looked a lot different to how he had appeared in *Castle Of Illusion*, but there was no denying how much richer the backgrounds and sprite design were.

Mechanically it was richer than *Castle Of Illusion* as well thanks to the introduction of unique costumes that would see Mickey hide behind a curtain and then change into either a magician, fireman or mountaineer. Each outfit allowed the intrepid mouse to do new things from dousing out troublesome flames to swinging around with a handy grappling hook. The suit changes added that little bit extra to Capcom's game, and you'd often need to utilise them if you wanted to retrieve all the goodies found on each stage.

The real highlight of owning *Magical Quest* back in the day (and also today, now I think about it) are the game's fantastic boss encounters. They're far more considered and varied than those found in *Castle Of Illusion* and they also do an exceptional job of showing the versatility of Mode 7. Take this encounter with an ice-skating Pete for example. It still looks absolutely wonderful today and I'm not ashamed to admit that I actually find him a lot trickier to beat compared to when I first encountered him in 1992. ✱

ULTIMATE GUIDE:

TIME CRISIS

A TERRORIST FACTION LED BY A DEPOSED ROYAL HAS KIDNAPPED THE PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER, AND THERE'S ONLY ONE GUY WHO CAN GET HER BACK TO SAFETY – YOU! LOOK BACK AT HOW NAMCO'S ALL-ACTION LIGHTGUN SHOOTER PUTS THE PEDAL TO THE METAL IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

Words by Nick Thorpe

Every so often, an idea comes along that is so simple yet so revolutionary, that you can't believe nobody had ever thought of it before – and *Time Crisis* has one of those ideas. *Time Crisis* is the product of the spectacular mid-Nineties arcade rivalry between Namco and Sega. The two companies were at the forefront of technological development, and at every turn the adversaries would take the opportunity to top each other's achievements. In 1994, Sega had introduced *Virtua Cop,* a lightgun game using polygonal graphics, so a Namco response was inevitable. That response was *Time Crisis,* and *Time Crisis* didn't just have a gun – it also had a big pedal. But we're getting ahead of ourselves, so let's get the basics established first.

In *Time Crisis,* you play as Richard Miller, a secret agent nicknamed 'the one-man army'. The VSSE agency he works for has received reports of an incident in Sercia, a republic that had previously suffered from years of authoritarian rule. Rachel MacPherson, the daughter of the nation's democratically elected president, has been kidnapped by Sherudo Garo, the last surviving member of the imperial family. Sherudo's demands are simple – imperial rule is to be reinstated, military secrets are to be turned over, and all of this is to be done by sunset. Failure to comply will result in Rachel's untimely death. Richard is dispatched to a small island off the northwestern coast of Sercia, where Rachel is being held captive in a castle, in order to mount a solo rescue mission – but as well as Sherudo's small personal army, he'll have to combat the mercenary forces of the criminal kingpin Wild Dog, who is aiding Sherudo in exchange for preferential treatment after the restoration of the monarchy.

[Arcade] When you first invade the fortified castle, you do so by smashing through the heavily guarded submarine port.

[Arcade] Richard has brought gifts for the Sercian welcoming party – a bullet with each of their names on.

[Arcade] Behind you! This soldier narrowly misses Richard's head, and instead takes out the mirror.

Like most lightgun games, the goal of *Time Crisis* is to shoot down your enemies before they shoot you. Wild Dog's mercenaries wear uniforms that denote their ranks, helpfully colour-coding them – those in blue are regular grunts, the ones wearing brown jackets are a bit more dangerous, and the guys in red are irritatingly straight shooters. Then there are the soldiers who typically wear green or orange and specialise in explosive weapons like grenades and rocket launchers, the shielded soldiers, and the claw-wielding assassins. If you get far enough, you'll encounter the white-clad imperial guards, who are amongst the game's toughest foes.

As we said earlier, the genius of *Time Crisis* is the addition of the foot pedal. This handles two important functions – firstly, rather than shooting outside of the screen as in so many other arcade blasters, you reload in *Time Crisis* by releasing the foot pedal. Secondly, just like in any good action film (and presumably, real life), Richard takes cover while he reloads. As long as you've taken cover, the enemies can't hit you and you can't shoot them – typically, you can't even see them – leading to many more possibilities than in previous gun games. Some enemies appear and almost immediately fire a shot on target, and if you can't take them out before they do, ducking into cover at least prevents you from losing a life. In another scene, you might enter to find a machinegunner already firing, watching a hail of bullets for a gap in which you might pop out and return fire. It even introduces the possibility of environmental hazards, such as falling objects.

Of course, in most lightgun games, dithering for too long will see you killed by bloodthirsty enemies. Being different, *Time Crisis* needed an additional element of pressure – after all, if you could stay concealed for as long as you liked, the game would be too easy and incredibly frustrating for arcade owners. So *Time Crisis* includes a time limit, much like racing games, with an extension granted every time a screen is cleared. If the timer ever reaches zero, the game is over immediately regardless of the number of lives you have remaining. In this respect, the game design supports the fast-paced action movie narrative, as you frantically try to clear out the baddies as quickly as possible.

[Arcade] Cutscenes like this really help to sell the action movie feel of *Time Crisis*.

BOSS RUSH

THE THREE DEADLY VILLAINS OF TIME CRISIS, AND HOW TO DEFEAT THEM

MOZ

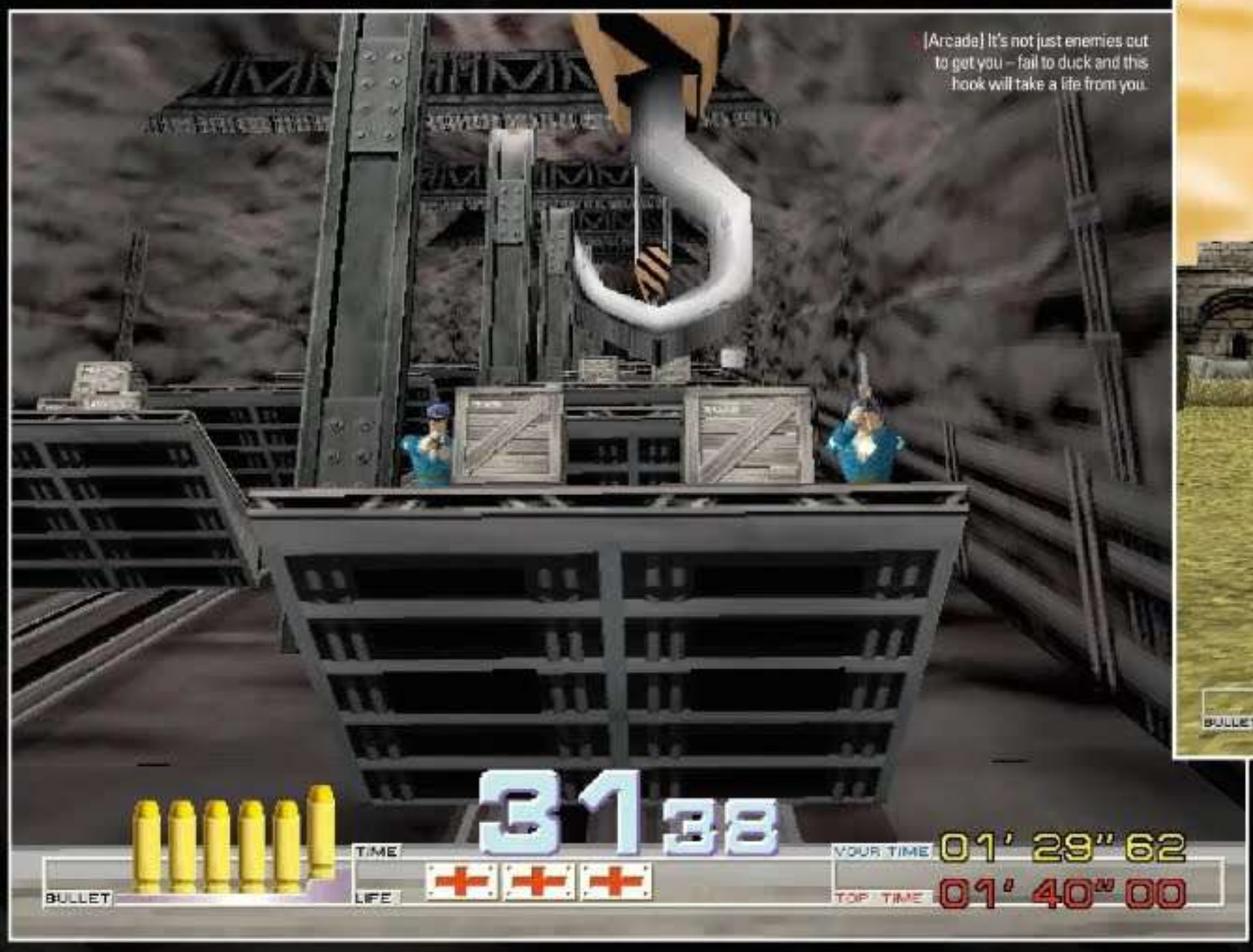
This leader of Sercia's clawed assassin ranks is quite an agile chap, leaping about the screen like a ninja. Landing your first couple of hits on him isn't too hard, so long as you remember to duck when he gets close and don't get confused by his grey-coloured mates. After you've hit him a couple of times, watch the sky – he'll leap from pillar to pillar before attacking you, starting from the left and moving right. Blow him out of the sky and keep on rolling.

SHERUDO GARO

This knife-wielding aristocrat has a deadly aim – just about everything he throws your way will hit. This usually means ducking after you've fired once, whether you hit him or not. He can roll out to the left, step out to the right or jump up behind the plant to begin with, and then go left, right or centre during the second phase. He can only appear from left or right in the final doorway phase, but he'll try to fake you out by peeking round the corner, so be wary.

WILD DOG

Once the jacket comes off, you know the big boss is serious. He starts off by circling the fountain, popping up to the left and right of the screen, before joining a bunch of particularly nasty enemies for a coordinated attack – watch out for the rolling stonework! During the final phase of the battle, he'll make himself hard to see by attacking from behind a wall of flame, and he quite likes throwing smoke grenades as the lead-in to a close-quarters attack.



[Arcade] It's not just enemies out to get you – fail to duck and this hook will take a life from you.

[Arcade] As you can see, the sunset deadline for Rachel's rescue isn't far away at all.

[Arcade] Careful with the exhibits! This museum breaks down pretty quickly, especially given who's hiding behind the paintings.

Right from the attract mode that fashions itself after a cinematic trailer, *Time Crisis* presents itself in an action movie style. Small stage opening cutscenes show Richard engaging in various heroic acts, from riding a hook-like zipline into the opening stage to scaling the side of a huge tower. Even the first-person transitions between action sequences are handled with that sensibility – there are some brilliant setpieces, such as when Richard looks up to see a squad crashing in from above on a chandelier, or when he's running toward a mirror only to see a soldier fire a round off from behind him. The audio is handled with similar aplomb. Although the soundtrack varies throughout the game, most of the main action scenes play to different parts of the main theme, with separate dramatic pieces reserved only for special occasions like boss fights. There's some wonderfully hammy voice acting in cutscenes, and enemies will shout as they make a beeline for Richard during the game, although only family-friendly things like, "Get him!" and, when hit, "Shucks!"

All of this action movie style would be pointless if the game didn't allow you to get in on the fun though, and *Time Crisis* delivers here. Whether you're going one-on-one with a helicopter, diving out of the way of a speeding car or fighting your way through a darkened room lit only by flashes of gunfire, *Time Crisis* makes you feel like a hero. Plus, thanks to certain secret tricks, you can cause appropriately high levels of carnage – there are explosive crates that allow you to take out entire rooms in one go, and even a moment that allows you to drop a bunch of girders on unsuspecting baddies. The boss battles, although they are few in number, are also incredibly dramatic. Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Time Crisis* received

ESSENTIAL ITEMS

CRUCIAL ADVICE FOR VSSE FIELD AGENTS

FORKLIFT INFERNO

In area 1-1, this forklift truck is carrying a crate full of explosives. Shoot the crate a few times to take out everybody in the area and save yourself some time.

KILL THE CAR

When the speeding car attacks you in area 1-3, the natural temptation is to dodge it. But you can also take it out by shooting it, which saves more time.

BOX OF TRICKS

There's another explosive crate hidden in this part of area 1-3, on the left of the screen by the grenadier. Unlike 1-1's crate, this won't end the scene.

[Arcade] Heavy weapons specialists come armed with machine guns, rocket launchers and more, and become more common as the game goes on.

CONVERSION CAPERS

WHY THE PLAYSTATION CONVERSION IS WELL WORTH BUYING IN ITS OWN RIGHT

[Arcade] Time's running out! If Richard doesn't get a move on, an automatic game over awaits.

critical acclaim. *Next Generation* magazine felt that the arcade version "thrusts the lightgun genre into a brand-new territory," and awarded it 5/5. In a competition to win an arcade cabinet, *CVG* described the ability to take cover as "A great gimmick, backed by a superb game – incredible graphics, and gripping situations.

Time Crisis' popularity quickly gave it the momentum needed for Namco to announce a PlayStation conversion, complete with a brand-new gun controller. A sequel followed in 1997, introducing new VSSE agents and a simultaneous two-player mode that took advantage of 3D by allowing players to view the same gunfight from a different angle – allowing players to target an enemy that may be hidden from their partner. Further sequels and spin-offs included innovations like weapon selection and a second foot pedal, allowing you to choose both left and right movement. While the series hasn't been spotted since *Time Crisis 5: True Mastermind* arrived in arcades in 2015, you can bet it won't stay dormant for long. If you need any reminder of why, just go back and play the original *Time Crisis* – its models and textures might look a little dated, but thanks to that foot pedal and some world classic game design, it's as thrilling now as it was back in 1995.

DEATH BY GIRDER

If you shoot the restraining strap holding up the girders at the end of area 2-1, they'll fall and kill the enemies – just make sure you duck away from the last one.

THE FUTURE'S BRIGHT

You never have to hit any of the soldiers wearing orange, but they'll add precious seconds to the clock if you do. Be quick though – they're quite shy.

You'd be forgiven for expecting the PlayStation version of *Time Crisis* to be cut down from the arcade game, and it is. The game runs at a lower resolution and at 30 frames per second instead of the 60 of the arcade game, and there are nips and tucks to both polygonal models and textures. However, the strong game direction ensures that it's just as fun in the home as it is in the arcade, provided you make use of Namco's G-Con 45 lightgun. But a faithful recreation of the arcade game isn't everything that the PlayStation version offers to players.

There's a brand-new mission in this home console version, set in a Sercian hotel that is actually a front for an arms factory, run by the enigmatic villainess Kantaris. The game proceeds similarly to the main arcade game, but with a crucial difference – rather than being predetermined, your path through the facility is determined by your performance in the game. That ensures there's a bit more replay value to this variant of the game, which is ideally what you want in a home console release.

Like its arcade parent, *Time Crisis* for the PlayStation was well received. *Edge* scored it 8/10, declaring that "Each time you think you've seen the most breathtaking setpiece, another tops it for sheer gun-toting thrills," and hailing it as "a videogame symphony of destruction". *CVG* gave it 5/5, with Steve Key commenting, "It's virtually a perfect conversion, but to have a batch of extra levels as well is a gamer's heaven!"

Future Classic

Modern games you'll still be playing in years to come

Info

- **Featured System:** PC
- **Year:** 2019
- **Developer:** ZA/UM
- **Key People:** Robert Kurvitz, Aleksander Rostov

Go Deeper

- *Disco Elysium* was originally developed under the title *No Truce With The Furies* until a name change in 2018. We think they're both pretty cool names, to be honest.
- *Disco Elysium* began life as a tabletop RPG campaign being put together by developer ZA/UM. It was only later that it evolved to become a videogame.

but we've never had any trouble there before..." She stops, then continues, worried. "There is a lot of crime around here, isn't there?"
KIM KITSURAGI – "I can't say it's the best part of town, but I wouldn't worry *too much* about a pair of grown men travelling together."
SUGGESTION [Medium: Success] – The lieutenant doesn't want to agitate the woman.
INLAND EMPIRE [Medium: Success] – Do it. Find her husband. This will *surely* lead to a cryptozoological mystery with that *extremely rare insect*...
CONCEPTUALIZATION [Medium: Success] – Some fringe-science is *exactly* what's needed right now. Spice up that *vanilla* murder investigation.
1. - "This sounds like police business. I'll help you find your husband." (Accept task)
2. - "That's too bad. I hope your husband comes back soon." (Decline task)
14.06 07:47

» [PC] Your skills will often egg you on to follow their own particular interests and proclivities.

Why this surreal detective RPG, packed full of innovative ideas, will go down in videogame history, not only as a fantastic game, but a revolutionary intervention into the genre

Words by Paul Walker-Emig

DISCO ELYSIUM

THE BACKGROUND

Development studio ZA/UM started as a relatively informal collective composed of artists, activists and writers playing around with *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns, among other things, in 2009. Over time, ZA/UM solidified to become a game developer and the game that would become *Disco Elysium* was its first project. The studio had no previous reputation to build on, but the promise of a game that would echo the best of *Planescape: Torment* in its gameplay design (yes, that means no combat), in combination with a beautiful watercolour art style, at least won it some attention. When it was released, its quality was undeniable. Lavished with deserved critical praise, *Disco Elysium* became an RPG essential.

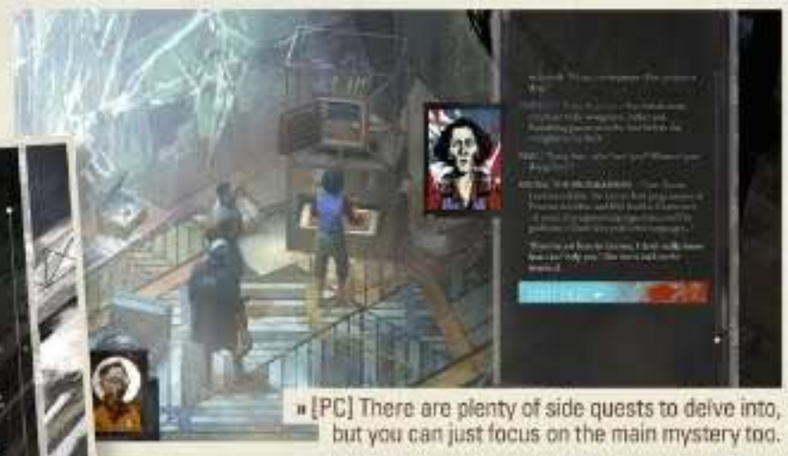
THE GAME

You play as a dishevelled detective coming off the back of a drink and drug bender who, despite an existential crises that has seen him forget everything about who is, has to get to grips with the issue of the man hanging from a tree outside the hostel he is staying at. You and your partner, Kim Kitsuragi, must solve this murder, primarily by heading out to interview the residents of the neglected district of Martinaise.

The way you go about doing this varies wildly depending on what kind of detective you build and how you invest skill points as you progress. Investing points in faculties like Logic and Visual Calculus will make you an intellectual detective able to make deductions about what happened at a scene and spot inconsistencies in testimony. Skills like Empathy and Inland Empire fall into the psychic category, making you able to pick up on how characters are feeling and be more sensitive to intuition. A high Perception skill will allow you to spot detail you would otherwise miss, Half-Life makes you better at intimidation, Shivers attunes you to the voice of the city, and so on.

The level of variety *Disco Elysium* is able to present thorough these skills and their different combinations is staggering. You'll find that investing a few experience points in a skill has the potential

» [PC] Your character's colleagues are on call to help out, but whether you think it would be a good idea to tell them you don't know what your name is any more is up to you.



» [PC] There are plenty of side quests to delve into, but you can just focus on the main mystery too.

» [PC] There are a few key ideologies in the world of *Disco Elysium*, you can align yourself with them, if you so choose.

» [PC] Out on the coastline you can meet the forgotten, disregarded and different.

Things of note

SKILLS

Disco Elysium's diverse set of skills let you shape your character's personality, along with their abilities. In fact, they are characters in their own right.

THOUGHT CABINET

This is a place where you can browse thoughts your protagonist has had. They usually offer some kind of stat buff when you're done contemplating them.

STRONG CHARACTERS

Disco Elysium's characters are fantastic. Some of them can seem like stereotypes at first, but you just don't know them well enough yet.

EMBRACING THE WEIRD

This game often takes an appealingly surreal tone. It's one you can lean into if you invest in the mystical and intuitive skills available.

PLAY DRESS UP

Every piece of clothing you wear comes with stat buffs and/or debuffs. You might look ridiculous, but playing dress up can make all the difference when you're trying to pass skill checks.

to completely change the way you experience the game and the city you are exploring – just one of the many compelling ways that *Disco Elysium* responds to player choice. What really makes *Disco Elysium*'s skill system special, however, is the fact that these skills all have a voice.

Imagine you're trying to pry some information out of another character. While your speaking, your skills will be popping up in your mind, offering their opinion on what's unfolding. Empathy might tell you that this particular character is upset about something, giving you a clue as to how you should proceed to get what you want. Invest more points in Empathy afterwards and it'll become a louder presence in your mind as you go forward. Invest *too* much and you might find that what was a useful skill starts to hinder your detective as he becomes overwhelmed with the emotional burden of picking up on everyone's feelings. Even if you don't push too far in one direction, you'll still have to deal with the fact that your skills will occasionally disagree on how you should handle a situation, creating a fascinating dynamic between the different parts of your detective's psyche.

This is all situated in a richly drawn world with a carefully thought out political history that offers a critical lens on the world that we live in. In the early going, it comes across as cynical and strange. To an extent, it still can be, if that's how you choose to play it. Give its characters time to grow, however, and you'll find something rich and complex that thinks carefully about how history and ideology inevitably shapes individuals and their lives. Having said that, none of this stops your tie talking to you now and again, so we suppose it is still pretty weird.

Even within the grand tradition of RPGs, this game, and its protagonist, are incredibly malleable, frequently responding to your choices in interesting ways. Taken in combination with the game's sophisticated worldbuilding, sharp political eye, unique mechanics and strong writing, it deserves every bit of praise it's got.

WHY IT'S A FUTURE CLASSIC

A game this good always has a chance of going down in history as a classic. *Disco Elysium*'s status is assured, however, by the influence it is sure to have on the RPGs we will be playing in the coming years. Its innovations in how skills become a part of your character and the degree to which they shape the way the world responds to you and the way that you interpret it, feel like a watershed for the genre. There's never been anything quite like it before, but, as is often the case when a game hits something new out of the park, there are bound to be games like it in the future. In decades to come, when we're casting our eye back over the history of RPGs and picking out those that have shaped its course, *Disco Elysium* will be one of those indelible reference points. That, above all, is what makes it a future classic. ✱

SO YOU WANT TO COLLECT...

CASTLEVANIA GAMES

Konami's series has a rich history that spans three decades. A potent mixture of iconic games, low prints runs and the recent success of Netflix's TV series means the franchise continues to gain interest from collectors. Let's look at the titles you should probably seek out first

Words by Darran Jones

MUSIC TO OUR EARS

CASTLEVANIA: SYMPHONY OF THE NIGHT

EXPECT TO PAY £33+ (JAPAN)

DEVELOPER:	KONAMI
RELEASE:	1997

■ Virtually everyone considers *Symphony Of The Night* to be the best game in the *Castlevania* series and it's certainly something we'd never dispute. Koji Igarashi's reboot was such a huge success it created a template that many later games followed and led to similar adventures being termed as 'Metroidvanias'. While it's not the rarest *Castlevania* game out there, it's certainly one with some of the highest price variances. The PAL PlayStation version is arguably the most collectible variant as it features English text and, like the Japanese version (£33+), comes with an excellent CD soundtrack. We've seen mint complete copies sell for as much as £350, but £200 seems to be the going rate. If you see lower prices, double-check the listing as it's probably missing the bonus CD, manual or game. If you're not fussed about the soundtrack then the US NTSC version is the best option as it runs at the correct speed and costs between £70 and £100. Finally, if you're a Saturn fanatic you can pick up the Japanese exclusive, with new areas and numerous technical issues, for £70 to £140.

EXPECT TO PAY £70+ (USA)

» [PlayStation] These two foes will be familiar to anyone who has played earlier *Castlevanias*.

EXPECT TO PAY £200+ (UK)

» [PlayStation] Watch out for this enemy, both ends are extremely dangerous.

TIME FOR A CHANGE

Take a look at the many forms of Symphony Of The Night's star, Alucard

Humanoid
You'll play as Alucard for most of the game. He has access to a large arsenal of weaponry and some great gear but Death nicks it all off him as soon as he enters Dracula's castle. Whoops.

Wolf
This is the first form Alucard picks up and it allows him to cover distances at great speed. Alucard also gains bite and charge attacks while using this form, but it's relatively weak.

Bat
This form is rather useful as it gives Alucard the power of flight, vastly opening up where he can travel. Additionally it can harness abilities like fireballs and the use of sonar.

Mist
This shape allows Alucard to avoid enemies and pass through grates. Eventually he'll be able to stay in this form for longer and even poison enemies with it.

THIRD TIME'S THE CHARM

CASTLEVANIA III: DRACULA'S CURSE

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1989

There are three *Castlevania* games available for the NES, and unsurprisingly the best one is also the game that fetches the highest prices. The Japanese version is generally most coveted as it features an enhanced soundtrack, it's also a little easier than the western versions, which is also worth considering. Prices for a cart start at around £35 with a complete version selling for around £80. Shelling out £35 will also net you a PAL cartridge. Boxed versions start at £150 and can climb to just over £200. Alternatively, if your console can play it, we'd suggest tracking down the NTSC US version as it is properly optimised and has classier artwork.

» [NES] *Dracula's Curse* is a huge graphical improvement compared to the first two games.

» [NES] The game's first boss puts up a good fight, so be prepared for a beating.

SOMETHING BOLD, SOMETHING NEW

CASTLEVANIA: ORDER OF ECCLESIA

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 2008

We're big fans of *Order Of Ecclesia* because it tries to do innovative things to the Metroidvania template and largely succeeds. Shanoa makes for an interesting hero, largely due to her ability to wield glyphs that can enhance her combat skills. Low print runs of *Ecclesia* now mean it's becoming one of the pricier DS *Castlevania* games to buy. You can get a lone cartridge for around the £25 mark (for comparison, *Dawn Of Sorrow* and *Portrait Of Ruin* cost around £35 complete), but you'll pay at least £60 for a complete European version. The US one is cheaper, while the Japanese version typically sells for £85. It does have a lot of text, mind, so maybe stick with the English options.

» [DS] There are plenty of macabre enemies that Shanoa faces in her first adventure.

» [DS] The glyphs are a great addition to the franchise, greatly expanding Shanoa's attacks.

WHO NEEDS A NINTENDO CONSOLE?

CASTLEVANIA: THE NEXT GENERATION

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1994

Let's get the bad news out of the way first: the recent inclusion of *Castlevania: The Next Generation* on the Mega Drive Mini has done absolutely nothing to lower prices of the original cartridge release. This is worth playing, though as Konami's only Mega Drive *Castlevania* is a real gem due to its imaginative boss fights, spectacular visual effects that really push the Mega Drive's hardware and a surprisingly decent soundtrack. The ability to play as two different characters, Eric Lecarde and John Morris, gives the game plenty of longevity and we'd argue the final battle with Dracula outstrips the one found in *Super Castlevania IV*. Unfortunately, every version of this desirable Mega Drive game isn't cheap. The PAL version sells for around £30 for a cartridge and costs £70 to £150 complete, the US version, titled *Castlevania: Bloodlines*, is available for around £90 complete, while the Japanese edition (search for *Vampire Killer*) ranges from an eye-watering £460 to £680!

» [Mega Drive] We're a big fan of Eric as his pole vault is super useful at times.

» [Mega Drive] It wouldn't be a *Castlevania* game without a foreboding tower to climb.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

Meet the two heroes of The Next Generation

JOHN MORRIS

Despite his surname, John Morris is actually descended from the Belmont bloodline. He is a bit of a traditionalist when it comes to vampire slaying and prefers to use a good old-fashioned whip to send demons back to hell. Thanks to that whip, John is able to swing from ceilings, which means that he can take a different route from Eric in certain stages of the game.

ERIC LECARDE

This intrepid explorer has known John since childhood, so was only too happy to risk his life to take part in his friend's incredibly dangerous mission. Unlike John, Eric's weapon of choice is the Alcarde Spear, a weapon that offers great reach. While he can't swing from ceilings like John, he does have access to a powerful pole vault move that can often get him out of harm's way.

COLLECTING TIPS!

Pirate carts abound

The high prices of *Castlevania* games means piracy is an issue. If you see a copy of a certain game that seems too good to be true, it's most likely a fake.

Different names

If you're after Japanese games, search for the name *Akumajou Dracula*. *Vampire Killer* is a good result for some games, too.

Not just eBay

Facebook groups and public forums are a good way to source rare games. Yahoo Auctions in Japan is also worth considering for the rarer Japanese titles.

Who needs mint?

You can save a fortune on a lot of *Castlevania* games by just buying the cartridge version. Just be sure to keep an eye out for possible fake copies.

MACABRE MODE 7

SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV

EXPECT TO PAY £90+ (UK)

EXPECT TO PAY £50+ (USA)

EXPECT TO PAY £35+ (JAPAN)

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 1991

Many consider this SNES classic to be one of the absolute best traditional *Castlevania* games and it's easy to see why. It's effectively a reboot of the original game, but is suitably enhanced for the SNES thanks to some exceptionally effective Mode 7 effects, an eclectic range of versatile bosses and a truly sensational soundtrack, which many consider to be the best in the franchise's extensive symphony of stunning tunes. Fortunately, *Super Castlevania IV* has no language barriers so the Japanese version is always worth considering, particularly due to its appealing box art. Cartridges start at a tenner and complete copies sell for around £35 to £60. The unoptimised PAL version is the most desirable and cart prices range from £30 to £50. Boxed copies also fluctuate between £35 and £135, but £90 seems to be the sweet spot. If you're not fussed owning the uglier NTSC US cart you'll be paying around £20 for the cartridge and £50 for a complete copy.

[SNES] The map is exceptional, showing just how far you've journeyed.

[SNES] The Mode 7 is excellent and really highlights you're playing an ambitious game.

WHAT MAKES SUPER CASTLEVANIA IV'S BOSS CREATURES SO GOOD?

The *Castlevania* series has always had some exceptional boss battles over the years, but the ones found in *Super Castlevania IV* have clearly left a big impression on us. Simon Belmont faces a number of exotic fiends on his way to Dracula's castle and the power of Nintendo's 16-bit console meant that they leave a far bigger impression that the mayors from the earlier NES games. You'll battle everything from a nightmarish skeletal head with a disgustingly ugly tongue to an impressive Mode 7 rock Golem that shrinks in size under the strength of your whip attacks. And let's not forget the dark lord himself who awaits you at the game's end.

BEGBIE DOES GOTHIC HORROR

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW

EXPECT TO PAY £3+ (UK XBOX 360)

DEVELOPER: MERCURYSTEAM/KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS
RELEASE: 2010

There's plenty to enjoy about this modern reboot. There's some great nods to the franchise's history, the cast features the likes of Robert Carlyle and Patrick Stewart, while some of the boss battles are truly excellent. It's all held together by a robust combat system and your upgradable Combat Cross, which gives you access to plenty of moves. Luckily, there's little interest in Xbox 360 and PS3 games at the moment so you can get *Lords Of Shadow* for little outlay. You should be able to get the Xbox 360 version for £3 and the PS3 offering for a fiver. The superior PC version is also available for £5. The limited edition featuring a collectible mask is pricier costing around £25 for the PS3 version and £45 for the Xbox edition.

EXPECT TO PAY £5+ (UK PC)

EXPECT TO PAY £5+ (UK PS3)

[PC] We're recommend playing the PC version as it's been exceptionally well optimised.

IS THE 3D CURSE BREAKING?

CASTLEVANIA:CURSE OF DARKNESS

EXPECT TO PAY £10+ (USA XBOX)

EXPECT TO PAY £48+ (UK XBOX)

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASE: 2005

Curse Of Darkness is a decent stab at a 3D *Castlevania* and differs from the earlier 3D games due to protagonist Hector having access to a large number of different weapons. He can also gain additional help from Innocent Demons which can be enhanced and evolved. When it comes to acquiring *Curse Of Darkness*, the cost differs depending on which version you plan to pick up. The PS2 outing is more easily available than the Xbox release and as a result prices fluctuate around £30, the US and Japanese versions are cheaper still, fetching around £20. With regards to the Xbox version, the price largely comes down to whether you can play American discs. If you can get the US game, go for it as it's around the £10 to £15 mark. If you can only play a PAL version, it's a much rarer game due to its smaller print run, and ranges between £48 and £75. No Xbox version was released in Japan.

[Xbox] Boss fights are a little clunky, but a huge improvement over the N64 3D games.

MORE GAMES TO CONSIDER

CASTLEVANIA

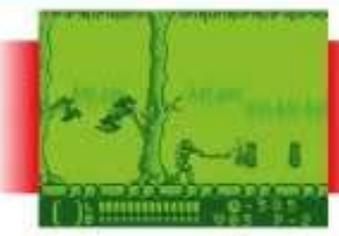
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 1986
EXPECT TO PAY:
£60+ (USA) **£90+ CART** (JAPAN) **£85+** (UK)

CASTLEVANIA II: SIMON'S QUEST

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 1987
EXPECT TO PAY:
£55+ (USA) **£100+** (JAPAN) **£35+** (UK)

CASTLEVANIA II: BELMONT'S REVENGE

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 1991
EXPECT TO PAY:
£90+ (USA) **£45+** (JAPAN) **£145+** (UK)



CASTLEVANIA LEGENDS

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 1997
EXPECT TO PAY:
£160+ (USA) **£105+** (JAPAN) **£257+** (UK)

CASTLEVANIA: CIRCLE OF THE MOON

DEVELOPER: KONAMI
RELEASED: 2001
EXPECT TO PAY:
£33+ (USA) **£62+** (JAPAN) **£17+** (UK)

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

CASTLEVANIA: LEGACY OF DARKNESS

EXPECT TO PAY £130+ (USA)

EXPECT TO PAY £80+ (UK)

DEVELOPER:	KONAMI
RELEASE:	1999

■ If you want a cheap *Castlevania* on the N64 then you should pick up the 1999 original. If your cash can stretch, though, we'd advise seeking out *Legacy* as you get far more mileage for your money. It not only works as a prequel to the first N64 release, focusing on newcomers Cornell and Henry, but also allows you to replay Carrie and Reinhardt's adventures. The game has been suitably rejigged, however, and features improved visuals, new level layouts and other improvements. This version also eradicates many of the niggles we had with the original. *Legacy*'s prices fluctuate: the Japanese version has a few language issues but is the cheapest at £45 complete. The unoptimised PAL alternative is around £30 for a cart, but usually £80 complete. The US version is even pricier with complete copies selling for £130 and often reaching £250.

» [N64] Cornell certainly has his hands full, fortunately he's quite the fighter.

A GAME WITH REAL SOUL

CASTLEVANIA: ARIA OF SORROW

EXPECT TO PAY £60+ (UK)

EXPECT TO PAY £40+ (USA)

DEVELOPER:	KONAMI
RELEASE:	2003

■ All the GBA *Castlevania* games are worth owning but the final entry remains our favourite. It's similar in many ways to *Symphony Of The Night*, featuring a levelling up system and the intriguing 'Tactical Soul' mechanic which allows hero Soma to absorb the souls of enemies and then use them to enhance his own powers. Today, this GBA classic is pricey, with a cart of the European version costing around the £35 mark. Complete is even more expensive, with prices ranging from £60 to £140. Although the Japanese version sold pretty poorly it's relatively easy to source and goes for around £68. The American version is similarly priced. Alternatively you can buy a European double pack which includes *Harmony Of Dissonance* for £40 to £95.

» [GBA] Soma has access to an impressive array of abilities.

IT'S BLOODY GREAT

CASTLEVANIA: RONDO OF BLOOD

EXPECT TO PAY £150+ (JAPAN)

DEVELOPER:	KONAMI
RELEASE:	1993

■ Even though this is easily available on PS4 as part of *Castlevania Requiem*, the original release still manages to fetch a handsome sum online. If you do have a PC Engine and a CD-ROM add-on it's certainly worth seeking out as it's still worthy of your hard-earned cash thanks to its branching levels, anime-styled cutscenes and a truly marvellous soundtrack. If you're lucky, you might be able to find a copy for around the £70 mark, but £150 is the usual price you're likely to play. It's more likely that the cheaper versions you see on eBay are reproductions by PCEWorks. If you're desperate to experience the game but don't have access to a PC Engine, there's the aforementioned PS4 version for £16.99 (digital-only, sadly) the cut-down SNES offering is grossly overrated and sells for £300 to £500 on PAL, while the Japanese offering is a better deal at £90.

» [PC Engine CD] There are plenty of decent boss fights, including this fearsome fellow.

OR YOU COULD TRY...

There's another version of Rondo to consider

If you've always wanted to play *Rondo Of Blood* on the go then let us suggest *Castlevania: The Dracula X* chronicles. This PSP exclusive is a 2.5D remake of *Rondo Of Blood* but also includes the original game and *Symphony Of The Night*. The US version starts at £20 or £25 (the cheaper price being the greatest hits version) while the UK offering starts at £30. The Japanese version is the most expensive, often selling for over £40.

CASTLEVANIA CHRONICLES

DEVELOPER:	KONAMI
RELEASED:	2001

EXPECT TO PAY:

£91+ (USA) **£25+** (JAPAN) **£55+** (UK)

CASTLEVANIA: HARMONY OF DISSONANCE

DEVELOPER:	KONAMI
RELEASED:	2002

EXPECT TO PAY:

£54+ (USA) **£68+** (JAPAN) **£41+** (UK)

CASTLEVANIA: DAWN OF SORROW

DEVELOPER:	KONAMI
RELEASED:	2005

EXPECT TO PAY:

£20+ (USA) **£23+** (JAPAN) **£27+** (UK)

CASTLEVANIA: PORTRAIT OF RUIN

DEVELOPER:	KONAMI
RELEASED:	2006

EXPECT TO PAY:

£14+ (USA) **£51+** (JAPAN) **£34+** (UK)

CASTLEVANIA: JUDGEMENT

DEVELOPER:	EIGHTING
RELEASED:	2008

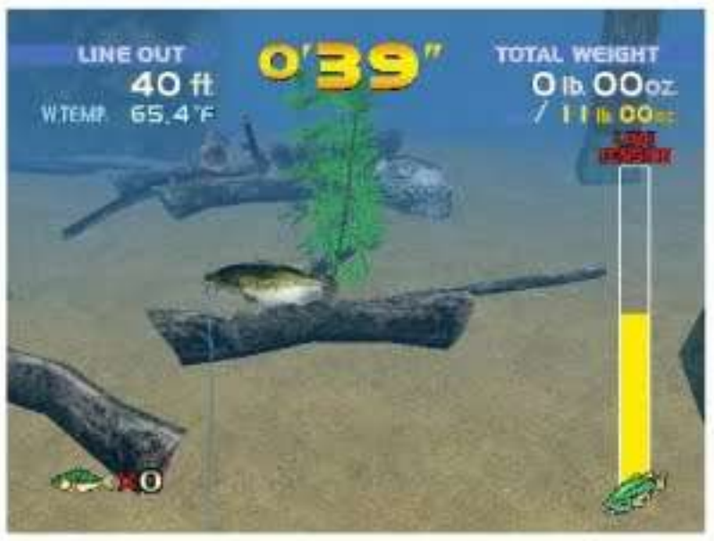
EXPECT TO PAY:

£6+ (USA) **£7+** (JAPAN) **£11+** (UK)

ESSENTIAL GAME

SEGA BASS FISHING

There's only one Dreamcast fishing game that was released in every territory, so it's the only one we can really describe as essential. Luckily, that particular game is pretty special. Sega's take on fishing ditches the hours spent on cold riverbanks and just concentrates on the thrills – the struggle between the fisherman and his next big catch. The arcade presentation still holds up well, with detailed underwater environments, driving guitar music and an excitable announcer who makes every single thing sound like it's the most thrilling event of your life. It's just gloriously silly fun, in that classic Sega coin-op tradition.



Fishing Controller

» **PLATFORM:** Dreamcast » **RELEASED:** 1999
» **COST:** £59.99 (launch, with *Sega Bass Fishing*), £15+ (boxed/unboxed)

There are a wealth of application-specific accessories out there in the world of retro gaming. Some, like steering wheels and lightguns, make reasonable sense due to the number of games that use them. Others, like dance mats and guitar controllers, serve to highlight the popularity of a particular gaming fad. And then there's the Fishing Controller.

Created to accompany *Sega Bass Fishing*, the home conversion of Sega's surprisingly popular arcade fishing game *Get Bass*, the Fishing Controller is designed to resemble the business end of a fishing rod. There's a handle, analogue thumbstick and buttons for your left hand, and a rotary device for your right hand to reel in the big ones. Additionally, the controller features motion-sensing functions and built-in vibration. Six fishing games were released for Dreamcast: *Bass Rush Dream*, *Lake Masters Pro*, *Reel Fishing: Wild*, *Sega Bass Fishing*, *Sega Bass Fishing 2* and *Sega Marine Fishing*. Of these, only *Sega Bass Fishing* was ever released in Europe. The official device isn't so common in Europe as a result, and it's easier to find third-party versions, but the controller works just fine across all regions so it's okay to pick up a Japanese or American model. ✱

Fishing Controller fact

■ Two non-fishing games also work with the Fishing Controller. *Soul Calibur* allows you to swing your sword by swinging the controller, and *Virtua Tennis* allows you to swing your racquet the same way.

In the chair with...

BIG BOY BARRY

Alex Verrey and his screen persona Big Boy Barry were stalwarts of gaming television in the Nineties. Meet the man who made fluorescent green tops cool. Sort of...

Words by Paul Drury

Alex Verrey was only 14 years old when he appeared as a contestant on Channel 4's *GamesMaster*, but his Sonic skills caught the eye of TV executives and soon he was appearing regularly on Sky's *Games World* as elite gamer Big Boy Barry. He went on to front his own segments alongside a pre-fame David Walliams and presented ITV's *TIGS* with Gail Porter. He moved into videogame PR in the Noughties and is currently CEO of his own company, Little Big PR. When we told Alex that more readers had submitted questions for him than for any of our In The Chair interviewees since Matthew Smith a decade ago, he was genuinely surprised. "Wow, I'm truly humbled," he grinned. "That's lovely to hear. I suppose that I'm the right demographic for your magazine!"

Is the highlight of your career beating Dave 'The Games Animal' Perry at *Street Fighter II* on national television?
Yes. But it was just another day at work for the Big Boy [giggles].

Have you seen his show on YouTube?
He's actually asked me to be on it and get tattooed live on camera while we chat about the old days, but I'm too scared to get a tattoo. Dave's a good guy and I've got nothing against people who put themselves out there. At least they tried – better than sitting at home being 'Joe Critic'.

Do you still get recognised as Big Boy Barry?
Yes, and it surprises me whenever it happens. I get asked for selfies, and my wife thinks it's weird but I think it's humbling. I haven't changed a lot, I suppose. You see those, 'What The kids From *The Goonies* Look Like Now' [articles online], and you'd have no fucking idea if you were sat next to them on the train. But me, I'm still an overweight gamer who likes to laugh.

Well, we reckon that there are worse ways to be remembered!
Big Boy Barry is still very much a part of me. I have a personalised 'BBB' number plate and my luggage is monogrammed BBB. I'm very thankful for it, and I don't shy away from it.

Reader MatOfTheDead wants to know where that persona came from?
When Hewland International started talking about this new *Games World* show for Sky, they wanted to have house champions called 'Videators', an obvious take on *Gladiators* which was big at the time. They got me on board and the original persona was a rip-off of Harry Enfield's 'Loadsamoney' character – this Essex wideboy. He was going to be a villain, saying he was great, you were crap... but it wasn't working so it morphed into a more likeable character, a playboy gamer who was pretty unbeatable.

» Alex very much embraces his Big Boy Barry past – his PR company is even called Little Big PR.

These days you would probably get accused of body shaming with a name like Big Boy.
The original name was actually Fat Boy! [Laughs]. I was a 15-year-old kid still at school and I didn't want to be known as Fat Boy. Jesus, it was hard enough growing up as a big guy. I didn't feel comfortable with it and neither did David, so we changed it to 'Big' and then Barry was added at the end.

I haven't changed a lot. I'm still an overweight gamer who likes to laugh
Big Boy Barry

Is the David you are referring to David Walliams, who would go on to find fame with *Little Britain* with Matt Lucas?
Yeah, he was a researcher on the show and helped develop the character. If you watch 'Peep Parlour' [the tips section of *Games World*] it really was a testbed for his crazy character work and the voices he made up – you can definitely hear Lou [of *Little Britain*'s Lou and Andy]. The budget was nonexistent so he created all these characters from a bag of tawdry joke shop props.

And frequent nudity.
Oh he loved nothing more than getting naked just to piss people off. He's an exhibitionist and doesn't really care about offending people if it serves the comedy. There would be people on the corporate side with their head in their hands at what he was doing.

Did you get in trouble?
Regularly. We'd get notes from the higher ups... like, his 'Lesley Luncheonmeat' character had an obsession with Ewoks, which were all his own gags and full of innuendos, and we were told we needed to scale it back. His response was to replace a whole section of the next show with him discussing in detail an Ewok village he'd built. For five minutes. On a videogame show. If you push him, he'll butt back!

You sound like you were good friends.
Without a doubt but he'd piss me off as well, especially on 'Barry's Joypad'. Every scene I did with him I'd be corpsing because he'd bring in something different each take. The director would have shouting matches with him. Often they would set a camera running and the crew would have to leave the room because David would say something and one of them would burst out laughing... you'd hear the director shout 'action' from another room! Yeah, there was a lot of hero worship from me because I thought he was the funniest person in the world. I'd tell him every day he should be a superstar.

Reader psj3809 asks if you keep in touch with David and other stars of the show?
I'll text David from time to time and I keep in contact with some of the Videators like Rik Henderson [The Violet Blade] and Mr Mathers, the Megabyte Millionaire, who's an old friend I have known since school. I have bumped into Bob Mills [the presenter for the first three series] a few times, too.

On-screen, Bob always looked like he was rather above it all. Did he get exasperated at having to work with these amateurs?
Yes he could. He really didn't get videogames and didn't really give a shit about them but he wasn't apathetic about the work – he cared about how he presented the programme and that made him a good entry point for those who weren't fantastically into games. I look back and think he was inspired casting. We'd shoot three episodes in a day – the contestant shows and the 'Beat The Elite' weekly finale – and that was a long day. Some Videators were stronger than others when it came to their performance and, yeah, Bob would get pissed off if they fluffed their lines. I don't wanna toot my own horn but I think he was pleased when I was on the roster because we always had fun together.

Maybe that's because this wasn't your first time on television. Didn't you appear on the first series of *GamesMaster* back in 1992?
[Laughs]. I have Teletext to thank for my career. How many people can say that? That was the source of breaking news before the internet and there was a call for audience members for this new show they were filming called *GamesMaster*. The first series was set in a big church in the East End [of London], the arse-end of nowhere, they were shooting in term time and there was no buzz about the show yet. They had real trouble getting an audience along. If you watch the first few episodes, you'll see they only really shoot the first few rows of the audience and then switch people around. Hilarious.

» [ZX Spectrum] Alex received *Samantha Fox Strip Poker* for the Spectrum aged 6. It was soon confiscated by his parents.

So you were originally just going to be in the audience?
Yeah, me and Martin Mathers applied for tickets and we were going to bunk off school. They came back to us and asked if we had gaming skills so we got on the show that series as contestants!

During your appearance, you come across as quite cocky by asking for your challenge to be made harder.
I was definitely a cocky kid, but that isn't how that happened! They had set me the challenge of collecting 150 rings in two minutes on the second stage of *Sonic The Hedgehog* and I had a month to get ready. I spent every minute I could practising. A week before filming, they phoned me to see how I was doing and I said I was up to 160 rings. Then when I got on the show, Dominik Diamond [the presenter] said, 'So you've asked us to increase the challenge to 160 rings, eh?'

» The Big Boy wasn't quite big enough to take on The Ultimate Warrior.

From game boy to laydee

QUESTION

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS

QUESTIONS

» The enduring love for Big Boy Barry meant he even appeared in the *Daily Mail* in 2011, alongside some chap called David Walliams who apparently did alright for himself.

FIVE TO WATCH

Alex picks his TV highlights

GAMESMASTER

■ "I was only 14 years old and that was the day that changed my life," Alex remembers of his TV show challenge. "Most humans only get one or two opportunities to go on a real life-changing situation and winning that *Sonic* challenge was one of mine."

MUHAMMAD ALI

■ "I did a feature for Barry's Joypad on a boxing game for the Mega Drive with Ali and got a pair of gloves signed by him," Alex says. "Having a TV show when you're a kid can make you blasé but I did realise how awesome that was at the time."

DAVID PERRY

■ "We did a feature with 'the other Dave Perry' who was at Shiny at the time, and what a nice guy he was. We was ferrying me round LA in his convertible with his beautiful wife, then drinks by his pool. It was the stuff dreams are made of!"

STAR TREK

■ "I'm a huge Trekkie" Alex admits, "and for one of the last episodes of BTV we shot a feature at the *Star Trek: Generations* premier. I got to interview Patrick Stewart and all the stars! I was meeting my heroes and it didn't disappoint."

HULK HOGAN

■ "I got to interview Hulk Hogan and we had lots of fun with each other. And I did this show called *Mad For It* where I played Pie Boy, who would throw custard pies at kids like in *Tiswas* and I got to have a fight with Bam Bam Bigelow from WWE!"

I was as shocked as anyone! I suppose it made for better television...

And you managed to do it!
It was a sliding doors moment. My career could've been so different. You see, you have to start with a spin on that level. They started filming, I messed up the spin and I died immediately with no rings. I was almost in tears. They could have, and perhaps should have, left it at that – and my television career would have been over in two seconds. Thankfully, I heard this voice from the gods saying, 'I think he deserves another go at that.' It was the director, and on my second go I smashed it.

Do you still have the Golden Joystick you won for completing the challenge?
I'm looking at it as we speak! I'm very proud of it.

Have games always been a passion?
For as long as I can remember being alive. It was all about finding arcade machines on holiday. I can remember taking 2p pieces over to Spain because the coins were the same size as the pesetas you put in the machines over there. Always thinking is the Big Boy!

Did you have any computers or consoles to play games on at home?
We had a *Pong* machine at home and then we got a rubber-keyed Spectrum 48K one Christmas. We were a Spectrum household and I was obsessed. *Manic Miner, Hungry Horace, Harrier Attack*... and our granny bought us *Sam Fox Strip Poker* without realising what it was. My parents confiscated it. I was six years old and devastated they'd taken away a game and I just didn't know why.

So games were always part of your life, but was acting too?
I do come from a theatrical family. My grandfather was a singer in the war. He was of Polish Jewish descent and he performed as 'Bernard Kanarienvogel The Singing Canary'. That wasn't a good name to have in lights at that time so he had a favourite restaurant called Verrey's and changed it to that. My dad was a keen actor and wonderful singer, and my cousin David Verrey is a professional actor. He was in *Knightmare* back in the day and in *Game Of Thrones* recently. And he was the first Slitheen you saw in *Doctor Who*!

Impressive, but what about you?
I had drama lessons as a kid and used to perform in shows with my dad. I was an extra in some ITV shows as a child but nothing big.

So was it a surprise when a year after appearing on *GamesMaster*, you got a call about this Games World show?
I thought it was a wind up! It came totally out the blue. When I got the gig as Big Boy Barry, I was 15 years old and still at school and it did cause problems. Initially, it was just going to be five or six performances with a day rate of £70, I think, which was a pittance but I was thrilled to be doing it. When the show aired and my character started gaining traction, they began bringing me in for more filming through the series and that meant taking time off school. The local council and my school were not happy with that. I had GCSEs coming up! I'd have to go to school in the morning and run out in the afternoon to shoot my Big Boy stuff. It was quite bizarre.

We've been revisiting Barry's Joypad and BTV and we've seen you in drag, David Walliams in Union Jack pants and the Games Mistress in leather mixed with news, reviews and serious segments on the latest VR headset. It was a real mishmash of stuff.
[Laughs]. I remember David and I once stole a document from the studio that described BTV as a mixture of *Going Live, Tiswas, Noel's House Party* and basically every light entertainment programme ever with *Tomorrow's World* and *News At Ten*. We found that hysterical. No one could really define what our show was about.

> "I have Teletext to thank for my career. How many people can say that?"
> Big Boy Barry

» Alex still occasionally adopts his Big Boy Barry persona. Here he is in character at EGX3.

That left it pretty open to do what you wanted, then!
It really did and we were a nice little team. It was the same production company that did *GamesMaster* but different teams and there was always some rivalry. They were the Channel 4 'premier' show that had a big budget and we felt we were doing more fun stuff and could get away with more – as long as it got through the Sky censors. Sometimes it didn't. There were times when 30 minutes before air we were told we had to take out some of Walliams' double entendres.

You mean lines like, 'I've got some pork that could be right up your alley'?
Yeah [laughs] but that one got through, obviously. As long as we were getting good ratings, they ▶

ACCEPTABLE IN THE NINETIES

» Big Boy Barry would invariably be seen with a mobile glued to his ear in the Nineties – this one is actually one of his smaller models.

For every *Smells Like Teen Spirit* there's an *Achy Breaky Heart* so we asked Alex if anything he'd done in the Nineties now left him squirming with embarrassment? "Mainly my own performances," he laughs. "I could've used some acting lessons back in the day. Big Boy Barry would always have babes on his arm and I don't think we'd do that these days. There was far less sensitivity about that kind of stuff back then. There are things I look back on with regret, like I wish I'd sat in on the edit more, I wish I'd got more involved with the scripts... but that's what happens when you're given your own show at 16. It's hard to take it all in. The fame side probably went to my head a little bit. I don't think I was ever an arsehole but I could've learned more."

were pretty happy with us, though, and it did evolve. Barry's Joypad was the first year and BTV was the second and that was much stronger. We'd do things that were serious and quite technical and others that were insane. I'm not sure we've seen anything quite like it since.

The game reviews did not pull any punches. Did you ever upset a publisher with one of your scathing verdicts?
Because it was TV, which is kind of the crown jewels for any PR, just getting on TV in any form was seen as kudos. That gave us the upper hand. I'm sure many publishers were pissed off with the scores we gave their games but if they complained, we just wouldn't feature them again.

Cheats also feature heavily in your programmes. Did you pester game developers for secrets to share on-screen?
I think the researchers just scoured magazines for interesting cheats and then got random kids to ask for help. The kids on camera has no idea what they were asking for! I mean 'The Peep Parlour' in the first series of *Games World* which Barry's Joypad replaced had whole walkthroughs, not just cheats. Kids would videotape the show and use it to get through games. No internet back then!

Reader Ulrich7ad wants to know if getting your own show caused any tension or jealousy with your fellow Videators?
Yes it did. They dumped most of the Videators from the first series and the new guys that joined for series two were keen to prove themselves. Some just said, 'I want what you've got,' and I respect them for that. Generally we got on but yeah, there was some tension.

Did you feel pressure to keep on top of your game as a Videator?
Absolutely. The first series was a dream for me because most of the Videators came from a theatrical background and were terrible at games... and those hired because they were good at games fell apart on camera through nerves. I was comfortable on camera, was a solid gamer and the contestants weren't that great because it was an unknown show. I sailed through... then everything changed for series two and three. The show was gaining popularity so the calibre of the contestants and the Videators went up. Plus I had my own show and I felt the pressure to do well on Beat The Elite to reinforce the Big Boy Barry character. I had to win! To their credit, Hewland didn't fix the shows – if you lost, you lost.

So the producers never fixed it to let the contestants win?
Never... well, apart from the final. The prize was an arcade machine and everyone wanted to see the kid go home with that. So during the grand final in series three, my character in *NBA Jam* stands still for a minute. Intriguing, eh? [Laughs] I'll leave at that.

Reader Fataddick wants to know which Videator was your biggest rival?
Backstage, everyone was keeping track of which Videator was winning, so yeah there were rivalries. Everyone wanted to be number one. The Violet Blade was always popular and in my opinion, Mr Mathers was the best gamer on the show. I felt the pressure because I'd often be filming my show and just didn't have as much time to practice.

> "Appearing as a contestant on GamesMaster was a sliding doors moment. My career could've been so different"
> Big Boy Barry

» Big Boy Barry realises he shouldn't have eaten that last mushroom...

» Alex still has the Golden Joystick he won on *GamesMaster* thanks to his *Sonic* skills.

» Big Boy Barry shows that he's still got the gaming skills at EGX1.

Reader Shinobi asks why you weren't a Videator on series four?
The show had been off air for a few years and was recommissioned as a morning show. I'd done a show with Gail Porter called *TIGS* [*The Interactive Game Show*] and I wanted more to do than the Beat The Elite role so I became a commentator along with Dave Perry throughout that series. I was really happy with that – and they did bring me back as a surprise Videator in the Grand Final! They kept that a big secret. I wasn't allowed to dress up as Big Boy Barry until they started filming so it was a real surprise for the contestant.

Why didn't *Games World* never returned for a fifth series?
I wish I knew, my friend. The ratings were high and it was still really popular. All signs were pointing to another series but I think Hewland has different ideas about their direction.

***The Barry Show* did return in the late Nineties on Sky's Computer Channel (later renamed .tv), though.**
It was sweet they called it a channel because it only broadcast for two hours a day at the start [giggles]. It was fronted by Will Hanrahan, a regular face on daytime TV back then, and it was supposed to be a serious look at computers for the whole family with a kind of *Tomorrow's World* feel. I wish they'd relaxed that so we could have more fun with it. I did persuade them to have a games-themed evening show but I had to wear a tie, goddammit!

Given the popularity of videogames, are you surprised they still don't often get on television?
Since the *Games World* days, I've been involved with so many pilots and scripts for shows, pitching ideas to TV executives and very little ever came of it. It's a shame because the audience could be massive. I still think execs don't know how to handle games. They're scared of them. They see the popularity of YouTubers streaming games and ask the very real question of what TV can do beyond that? News and trailers don't have the importance they used to have because of the internet. They get that games are huge but don't see how to tap into that.

Are there any videogame shows that have impressed you since then?
I thought *Go 8 Bit* was good and I'm a big fan of *Gameswipe*. I think I featured in it once? Charlie Brooker is a genius and if you're reading this Charlie, give me a call!

You have appeared on *Digitiser: The Show*. Did it remind you of the anarchy of those BTV days?
It did and that's on the right track. I'm a fan of Paul Rose and it's astonishing what he's done with almost nothing. It's like he willed that show into existence. I wonder what would happen if you applied a big budget to that kind of sensibility...

Could Big Boy Barry be the one to front something like that?
I am speaking to some people right now about an idea for a games show. I think you have to tap into the culture and do something you can't already get on the web.

I mean you have 'presented more games television than anyone else in the country'.
[Laughs] I came up with that line a while ago and I'm still waiting for anyone to dispute it! I mean, if you're including the likes of YouTube or Twitch, I haven't, but in terms of 'proper TV', I think I hold onto that crown.

YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

The Big Boy puts his massive mobile down to answer your questions

FATADDICK: Are you and Charlene still together?

Romantically, I'm afraid not. She was one who slipped through the fingers! I'm still good friends with the lovely Sarah Phillys, who played my girlfriend Charlene. She's very happily married and has a wonderful family.

SHINOBI: Was it true that The Executioner (Videator Gary Harrod) wore the mask because he was very shy?

Yes it was! He was a bit of a hero of mine – back then, videogame journalists like Gary were our PewDiePies. I was in awe! Gary loved his job and was an incredible gamer but he really didn't like the cameras. They made the genius move of putting him in a mask so he could hide.

ERIC: How are your *EA Hockey* skills today?

[Laughs]. On 'Beat The Elite', the contestant hit a button with a mallet and it was supposed to be random which Videator they had to face – but it can't be because you need them all ready for filming! As soon as they announced which game they would be playing, you just knew which Videator it would land on, and if it was *EA Hockey* or *Sonic* you knew you were about to get some Big Boy! I loved *EA Hockey* and still think it's never been bettered... and I'm confident I can take down any of your readers.

MERMAN: Have you ever had to do PR for a game you hated?

Absolutely. That's part of the job. Hated, though, probably not – we get loads of emails daily from people asking us to do PR and if we think their game is dire, we will be honest and say we don't think it's going to succeed whatever we do. And we've turned stuff down when it has a dubious moral sensibility. There was this 'seduction' game and we just didn't want to be associated with it.

2
TERRY BOGARD
RUSH
2
HITS

Garou: Mark Of The Wolves

THE KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT

» NEO GEO » 1999 » SNK

I'm usually on the receiving end of a lot of 'kids these days' rants, despite being in my thirties – such is life as a millennial. You've probably heard about us in the *Daily Mail*, where we're accused of being snowflakes and killing doorbells. For that reason, I try not to moan about what I perceive as youthful ignorance, but online reactions to the inclusion of Terry Bogard in *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* have flipped the switch and now I'm in full Grandpa Simpson mode.

The most prominent complaint that I've seen has been that Terry somehow doesn't deserve the spot. "Literally who is Terry Bogard, what is *Fatal Fury*, WTF is SNK," says one *Smash* fan. "No one even knows that flop character outside of Japan," says another. These are *real things* that *actual human beings* have said. It's kind of astonishing – SNK has been one of Japan's most prominent developers, its hardware was the backbone of the Nineties arcade market. Terry Bogard has been in dozens of games – and ironically, more of them are crossovers than actual *Fatal Fury* games. Hell, Terry is a marquee inclusion in *The King Of Fighters* series – not only the first major crossover fighting series, but one of *Super Smash Bros* series director Masahiro Sakurai's arcade favourites. Worse yet, people are saying it's impossible to memorise his moves and that "any character with inputs is poorly designed" – never mind the fact that you can use *Smash*-style commands instead of Terry's *Fatal Fury* move inputs.

But you know what really worries me? This shows that these kids have never played *Mark Of The Wolves*. They don't have to be a lost generation, though – there's a Switch version available. We can teach the youth, wean them off wavedashing and teach them about the beauty of the Just Defend and the Tactical Offensive Position mechanics. Once they look past the fact that he's wearing different clothes, they'll see how well those clothes are animated. Hopefully, when they discover a classic of the fighting genre, they'll have a little more respect for SNK – and maybe explore what else *Smash*'s historic characters have to offer. ✱

>> Shenmue III finally arrives, four years after it was first announced. Has it been worth the long wait? Elsewhere in this issue, Darran takes a look at a brand-new Mega Drive game and checks out a couple of new retro books

Shenmue III

MAYBE I SHOULD GET ANOTHER?

» [PS4] Training solo builds Ryo's endurance, while sparring with others lets him develop his attacking techniques.

INFORMATION

- **RELEASED:** OUT NOW
- **PRICE:** £54.99
- **PUBLISHER:** DEEP SILVER
- **DEVELOPER:** YS NET
- **PLAYERS:** 1

Here's a sobering thought: it's been 18 years since we left Ryo Hazuki in the cave he found at the end of *Shenmue II*. In that long period of time, we have seen famously protracted developments such as *The Last Guardian* through from start to finish, and even *Duke Nukem Forever* completed its nightmarish 14-year journey in the interim. And with fan backing for *Shenmue III* reaching into the millions of dollars, it's safe to say that Yu Suzuki's follow-up has a certain level of expectation attached to it – one that it could perhaps never live up to, especially given that the game has a lower budget and smaller team than its pioneering Dreamcast predecessors.

» [PS4] The locations that Ryo and Shenhua spend their time in are definitely the graphical highlight of the game.

But for all the odds against it, *Shenmue III* is here, and it is a faithful follow-up to its forebears. The rhythm of the game is essentially the same, as Ryo spends the majority of his time investigating the disappearance of Shenhua's father and occasionally getting into fights. When he's not doing that, there are a range of distractions available to him – he can earn money by splitting logs, gathering herbs or fishing, or he can hone his martial arts skills by training and sparring. He can have fun playing in the arcade, buying capsule toys and gambling, or he can take on all manner of side quests from the people he meets. It's not the biggest open world, but it's quite dense.

Of course, this means that if you're not a fan, you shouldn't expect to love this. Everything that was divisive about the older games has returned, and in some cases they're back with a vengeance. *Shenmue III* is so slow-paced that it outdoes the original game, which is quite an achievement. The English voice acting is still decidedly ropey, and QTE sequences can still prove to be an unwelcome interruption during cutscenes. If you got annoyed trying to catch leaves in *Shenmue II*, chasing after chickens here will irritate you to no end.

That's not to say that nothing has changed, though the evolution is subtle. The frequent loading breaks of old are

BRIEF HISTORY

» The original *Shenmue* games were key exclusives for the Dreamcast, and while they sold reasonably well, they could never justify their huge budgets. But players that loved them couldn't accept that the cliffhanger ending of the second game would never be resolved, and spent years campaigning for a third game. In 2015, Yu Suzuki launched a Kickstarter for the game in a memorable presentation at Sony's E3 conference. That raised a record $6.33 million, and fan funding rose to over $7 million with 'slacker backers' accounted for. The finished game is finally here, almost two years after the projected December 2017 release date.

★ PICKS OF THE MONTH

DARRAN

Xeno Crisis

It's 2019, I'm playing a new arena shooter on the Mega Drive, and it's great fun. What a fantastic time to be alive!

DREW

Pokémon Sword

The 'Dexit' debacle has ticked a lot of people off, but not me. I'm loving this *Pokémon*-themed love letter to the UK.

» [PS4] The action intensifies as Ryo chases a pair of thugs through the city streets of Niaowu.

» [PS4] Splitting logs is just one of many part-time jobs, with a fan favourite returning later in the game.

replaced by a seamless open world, and controlling Ryo is far less of a chore than it was in the past. Items of interest are highlighted by a nice red glow, and an exclamation mark icon alerts you to any potential side quests. Additionally, there's a greater sense of purpose to everything that Ryo does – you could buy drinks and snacks in the past, but eating and drinking now restore Ryo's health. Arcade games are more than just a distraction, awarding tickets to redeem for rewards. And thanks to the experience system, it's easier to gauge the effect that your training efforts are having on Ryo's performance.

The combat has been overhauled too, seemingly with a view towards simplifying things for traditional RPG fans. Rather than the old method of using directional commands and buttons to pull off moves, you now use button inputs pretty much exclusively, and you can assign moves to R2 to ease things further. You can also heal yourself in battle using the expensive Snake Power drink, and dodging enemy attacks only requires a well-timed flick of the analogue stick. There has been some loss of depth as a result – most notably, there's no throw button now – but the new ability to target individual foes during group fights is very welcome, and the camera is broadly less wayward than it was in the past.

But the magic of *Shenmue* was always that it allowed you to absorb yourself in the everyday life of a place and time far removed from your own experience, and this is still true. The fields and rivers of Bailu often look beautiful, and as you'd expect, its villagers still have their own routines. You now get to learn all of their names too, and while their character models are often quite rough (a factor of the relatively low budget, no doubt), they're a joy to get to know if you're in tune with their slow pace of life. The atmosphere is just rather cosy – it's nice to come home to Shenhua every night and see her and Ryo learning more about one another. Of course, once you reach Niaowu, the bright lights reflecting off the water create some amazing scenes, too, and this city is much more welcoming for those who enjoyed the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong in *Shenmue II*.

More than anything this is a game for the fans, and if you've waited patiently to see Ryo's story continue this game will satisfy you, even though it doesn't conclude the tale. Of course, you probably made your mind up about buying *Shenmue III* back in 2015. But for potential *Shenmue* newcomers, this is the easiest entry point to the series – there's a recap movie to get you up to speed with the story so far, and it's less clunky than its recently reissued predecessors. If you enjoy taking your time with a game and diving into the distractions it offers, you'll love it. Just be warned that it is an extremely slow-paced game, and if that's not what you're after then you might find yourself better served with something like the *Yakuza* series, which offers a similar experience but with a greater emphasis on action and fast-paced drama. ✱

✱ WHY NOT TRY

▼ SOMETHING OLD
SHENMUE II (DREAMCAST)

▼ SOMETHING NEW
YAKUZA 0 (PS4, PC)

In a nutshell

Despite the financial constraints, Yu Suzuki has delivered an authentic *Shenmue* experience with today's technology. Like any *Shenmue* experience, that will make it divisive – but those of the right disposition will love it.

>> Score **72%**

» [PS4] All your favourite distractions are back, including the eternally compelling capsule toy machines.

»The fully usable keyboard makes playing some games a lot easier compared to the Mini version.

TheC64

BUILDING A BETTER BREADBIN

INFORMATION

» **RELEASED:** OUT NOW

» **PRICE:** £109.99

» **PUBLISHER:** RETRO GAMES LTD

» **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

» **PLAYERS:** 1-2

BRIEF HISTORY

» Originally launched as an Indiegogo project in 2016, TheC64 received only $100,611 of its $150,000 goal, but kept the funding as it was a flexible goal rather than all-or-nothing. The mooted December 2016 release date was missed by a wide margin, and the project's initial release was TheC64 Mini in March 2018. TheC64, the version reviewed here, has changed in spec somewhat over the last three years, dropping the cartridge and USB slots and moving to a full-size recreation of the original system, instead of the proposed slimline form. The promised handheld version, The 64 SX, has yet to be released.

A couple of years ago, Retro Games Ltd released TheC64 Mini, and we broadly liked it. The 50% scale recreation of the classic 8-bit computer offered a decent selection of games and the ability to load your own, as well as clean 720p video output and a good range of options. However, it wasn't a perfect experience. Loading your own games was a bit unwieldy, the virtual keyboard interface was a bit clunky, and the bundled joystick wasn't much fun to use. The good news is that the full-size version of TheC64 rectifies most of the problems that we had with the older, smaller device.

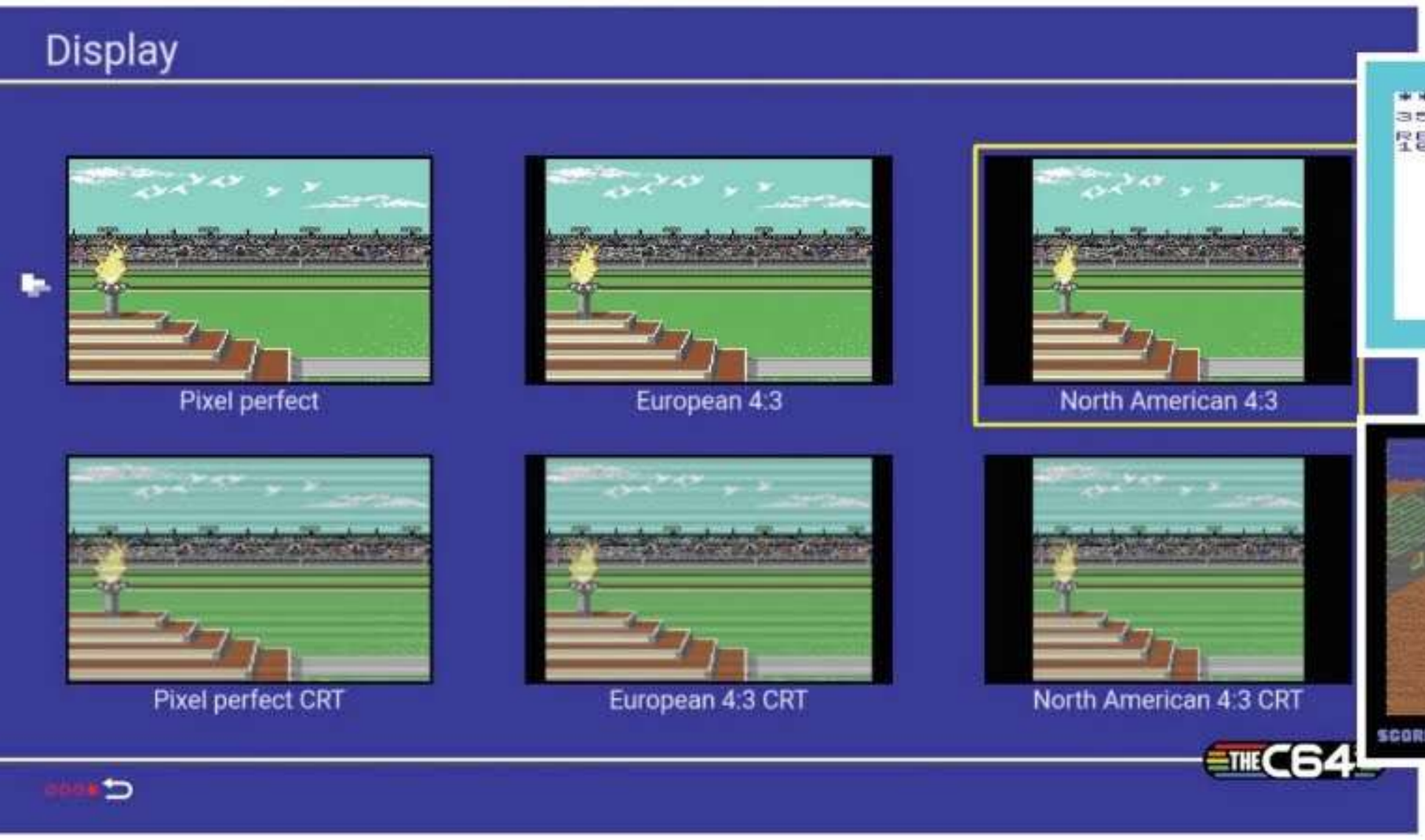
As with the previous machine, the exterior and presentation are handled extremely well. The box contains everything you need to get started – the machine itself, plus the joystick, a Micro USB cable for power and a HDMI cable for video. Pleasingly, the machine doesn't follow the recent trend of skimping on plug adapters for the USB power cable, and a multi-region one is included. There's an authentic-looking quick start manual in the box, too. The machine itself is a full scale recreation of the original Commodore 64, and feels just as you'd hope. As well as the power and video ports, the system includes four USB slots, enabling you to connect two joysticks, an external keyboard and a memory stick should you desire. That's a big step up from the previous machine, which only had two slots. There's no way to connect original

»[TheC64] *Galencia* might not be truly old, but the arcade blasting is so good that you won't really care.

»[TheC64] The impressive *Nebulus* is one of the highlights of the game list.

»[TheC64] *Gridrunner* is one of only two VIC-20 games built into the system.

»[TheC64] Most retro gaming devices don't offer as many screen options as TheC64 does.



»[TheC64] It's possible to go into BASIC, though most of us will still just do this.

»[TheC64] We appreciate the CRT filter, but we'd love the ability to tweak the intensity of the effect.

Alleykat
It's the Alleykat racing season. Can you become the champion? Compete in eight orbiting space stadia. Choose from demolition derbies, time trials, endurance epics and other battles. Spin your multi-mode alleykat speeder past the cavorting katerkiller. Gyrate round the gripping grevo craft. Can you join the best speeder pilots in the alleykat finale?
Author Andrew Braybrook
Composer Steve Turner
Genre Shoot 'em up
Year 1986
THEC64

»[TheC64] The system's presentation is basic but effective, showing screenshots, information and box art for each game.

Commodore 64 peripherals, as you may have expected, however.

The presentation is similar to the previous offering, with a game carousel showing the system's built-in games, backed by a jaunty SID tune. Like before, you get the option of a pixel-perfect display or PAL and NTSC 4:3 ratios, with the additional possibility of a CRT filter – a nice selection, though it's still not possible to adjust the strength of blurring or scanline effects in CRT mode. Still, amongst competing devices, this is one of the better sets of screen options out there. The virtual keyboard is still there if you ever need it, but you likely won't.

There's a good selection of 64 games on offer here, covering a range of genres. It's largely the same as the old list, featuring a good range of classics including *California Games, Boulder Dash, Uridium* and *Impossible Mission*. However, there have been 13 changes since the previous system, and some of the high-profile games that were on the mini system have been excluded this time around, including *Armalyte, Creatures* and *Skool Daze*. In the selection replacing them, Jeff Minter's games are the most well-known, including *Attack Of The Mutant Camels, Hover Bovver* and the VIC-20 games *Gridrunner* and *Psychedelia*. There's also *Galencia*, a rather ace *Galaga*-style shooter that was released in 2017.

Of course, if you don't like what's on the system to begin with, you can load more Commodore 64 or VIC-20 games using the USB port. This uses a straightforward menu system that is much easier than the mini's original method of loading external games, though we understand that was updated post-launch. However, it took a few tries to find a USB stick that would actually work with the system – you may wish to bear this in mind and perhaps research supported sticks before buying. You can also boot into classic mode and write your own game for either machine. The addition of the older Commodore machine is a welcome bonus, though obviously the system's library isn't as vast as that of its more successful sibling.

But the big improvement this time around concerns control. Having access to an authentic keyboard is awesome, but we're actually even more impressed by the improvements to the joystick. The new model is cosmetically similar and offers the same number of buttons, as well as a joystick with a similarly short throw, but it's fully microswitched – stick and buttons. That little bit of extra feedback made the world of difference to our perception of responsiveness and control, though it does mean the stick is much noisier when in use. If that's bothersome to others in the room, we suggest (with tongue firmly in cheek) that you find better company.

We do have some complaints, though. The quick start manual included with the device doesn't explain much, so you'll need to turn to online documentation if you have any problems. Additionally, there are no on-board manuals of any kind for the games, some of which are not exactly self-explanatory. And while the price seems pretty reasonable to us, the inclusion of only one joystick might seem a little stingy compared to the SNES and Mega Drive mini consoles, both of which were quite a bit cheaper and included two controllers – but of course, you can use both keyboard and joystick if the game supports that.

With solid improvements from its predecessor and few major faults, TheC64 is amongst the better classic gaming machines we've tested. It's a bit more expensive than most – particularly TheC64 Mini, which we've seen for as little as £30 lately – but if you love the Commodore 64, it's definitely worth a look. ✱

In a nutshell

TheC64 is a solid step up from its miniaturised predecessor, correcting most of that machine's flaws and introducing some good new features. In an increasingly competitive field, it stands out as being worthy of praise.

»[TheC64] Jeff Minter's games – like *Attack Of The Mutant Camels* – are arguably the highlights of the new additions.

★ PICK OF THE MONTH

Xeno Crisis

» **System:** Mega Drive (tested) Neo Geo AES, Dreamcast, PC, Switch, PS4, Xbox One
» **Buy it from:** Online, shop.bitmapbureau.com » **Buy it for:** £55 (Mega Drive) £14.99 - £199 (other versions)

From the moment you start playing Bitmap Bureau's new game it's obvious that it's something a little special. It starts off with some great looking cutscenes, setting up the flimsy 'us against the aliens' story and then gets straight into the action. And what ridiculous action it is.

At its heart, *Xeno Crisis* is an arena shooter in the style of *Robotron: 2084* and *Smash TV*. You'll enter an area and won't be able to leave it until every single alien has been eliminated. You'll need all your wits about you in order to succeed and if we're honest, a six-button joypad is useful as well. *Xeno Crisis* shines with a friend, as you can handily revive each other, which massively improves your chances of success.

On a three-button pad, B takes care of firing (keep it held down to fire in that direction), A lets you perform an evasive roll, and C chucks grenades. However, when the B button is held down, the other two buttons rotate your fire left or right. It's not an elegant solution for multi-directional firing, but works well enough. Fortunately, a six-button pad completely eliminates this niggle, so you can easily fire in whatever direction you need, as well as having instant access to those handy rolls and grenades.

And you'll need them, because *Xeno Crisis* is one tough mother of a game, requiring your shooting skills to be in tip-top condition as you run around the levels picking up dog-tags and stranded hostages. Interestingly, your ammo is limited to 100 shots (it can be upgraded), meaning you'll need to seek out more whenever it pops up on-screen (typically when you're down to your last few bullets). Taking down the game's gigantic bosses is not only immensely satisfying, but also takes you to a useful upgrade screen where you can spend those dog-tags to upgrade health, weapons, ammo and even gain extra continues.

Xeno Crisis will be an excellent addition to anyone's Mega Drive library, and is arguably one of the best arena shooters on the system. It's a frantic, frenetic blaster that reminds us of the good old days.

» Score **87%**

»[PC] The modern console versions are cheaper, and don't have the button issues of the Mega Drive outing.

»[Mega Drive] Finish a level and you'll be able to upgrade your marine in a variety of ways.

Eight Dragons

» **System:** PC » **Buy it from:** Online
» **Buy it for:** £9.99

Extend Mode's throwback beat-'em-up offers a simple but solid brawling experience with some interesting control ideas, some of which work better than others. Shifting the command to grab a weapon off the main attack button is great, but the ability to back away from an enemy while still facing them can cause problems at times. The big draw of Extend Mode's new game is the ability to get together and beat the heck out of some bad guys, with up to eight players supported in multiplayer – that's probably the best way to play, as the more powerful enemies feel a little overwhelming to fight alone. *Eight Dragons* is being updated regularly, so it's certainly worth keeping an eye on.

» Score **67%**

Konami's MSX Legacy: The Unofficial Story

» **Buy it from:** amazon.co.uk
» **Buy it for:** £42.41

If you're expecting a juicy look at the creation of the MSX you'll most likely be disappointed. You won't get a behind-the-scenes look at how Konami came to be involved with the MSX and its follow-up, but you will be treated to detailed looks at all the games Konami released for the systems, from *Space Manbow* to a gigantic section on *Snatcher*. Everything from cheats to the controls of each game is included and there are also little extracts on how games play. It lacks the polish of the other book we've featured this month, and feels a little pricier as a result, but at over 800 pages, there's no denying its comprehensiveness.

The Unofficial SNES Pixel Book

» **Buy it from:** bitmapbooks.co.uk
» **Buy it for:** £29.99

The latest offering from Bitmap Books offers a solid overview of the gorgeous art that could often be found in many Super Nintendo games. It covers all the usual suspects, from *Zelda: A Link To The Past* to *Chrono Trigger*, and ensures plenty of lesser-known games get their moment in the limelight, too. It's not the most insightful book, as there's very little info in here that most SNES aficionados won't already know, and the brief coverage of certain games and genres highlights that, but it's hard to ignore the sheer enthusiasm that Robert Bannert and Christine Bauer have for the subject matter. Pure eye candy at a very reasonable price.

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Gamers HOMEBREW

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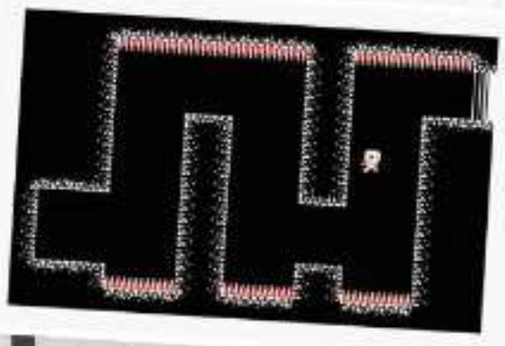
[Amstrad CPC] Deciding what to do with a poor dice throw in *Cobra*.

Gaming NEWS

[Amstrad CPC] Racing with *Bikemasters* leads to some exciting bike action.



[Amstrad CPC] Avoiding spikes and wall jumping towards the exit in *Miss Input*.

STUDYING THE CPC

Amstrad CPC owners have done well for new releases of late, first with the release of *Pinball Dreams* and now with a batch of contributions released for CPC Retro Dev. This was the sixth instalment of the competition organised by the University Of Alicante and an impressive 35 new games released for it.

Some titles covered familiar ground like *Bikemasters*, which takes inspiration from the classic NES game *Excitebike* where the player races against other riders through ramp-laden tracks and around hazards. Shoot-'em-up fans might want to give *Epimeteo* a blast since it takes cues from the C64 game *Crazy Comets* and involves smashing newly formed planets into dust, or *ManPac* might seem both familiar and unusual in that it turns the *Pac-Man* formula on its head, only having one ghost and handing control of it to the player while challenging them to catch the maze-dwelling yellow creature.

Top-down mazes seem to be popular this time. *Ratones Y Mazmorras* translates to *Mice And Dungeons* which pretty much explains what the game is about apart from mentioning the hazards which get between the player-controlled rodent and keys which must be collected to unlock the exit. *Happy Monty* is another single-screen challenge with an unusual two speed feature on the player's movement to shake the design up while both *Woods Rescue* and *Jackstrad* are flip-screen adventures set in fantasy worlds, with the lead character in both cases being armed and having to take on evil guardians.

One of the more unique ideas this time is *Cobra* which supports multiple players and is based on a popular Spanish board game. To make things more interesting, there are minigames selected at random which must be completed before a player can roll their dice to advance.

There's plenty of platform-based action from cute titles like *Super Tongue Dino* – the titular character can lick walls to hold onto them – or the fast-paced and ninja-themed *Shinobu*, but the competition winner is *Miss Input* where the player controls Jonny, an avid mountaineer who finds himself deep underground after an unexpected earthquake opens a hole in the ground and he loses his footing. This leaves our hapless hero surviving on just his wits, the occasional gravity-altering items he comes across and his ability to wall jump.

Jonny's daring outing and the other entries we've spoke about here are available along with further info and the competition's results over at Kikstart.me.uk/cpc-retro-dev-2019.

NEW GAMES NEEDED

If you have a homebrew project you would like to see featured then please contact us at: **retrogamer@futurenet.com**

·HOMEBREW HEROES·

Alejandro Del Campo - frequently known as Rhino of BG Games - is the programmer who decided Pinball Dreams could and indeed should be released for the Amstrad CPC, so we wanted a quick natter to find out more

THE BIG INTERVIEW

Converting *Pinball Dreams* must have been a mammoth task, who was involved in it?

Definitely we were a big team for an 8-bit game: 12 testers to adjust the gameplay (QoM, Higgy, Kukulcan, Dredd, SuTeKH, MaV, Raft, Mac, The Broth3rs, Batman, Maxit and Alejandro Valdezate), three musicians (SuTeKH, Raft and McKlain), three other graphicians (Mac, Toni Gálvez and me), Arnoldemu provided the disc loader and I made the code and tools while Batman (BG cofounder) provided support to the development.

How long did development take and where do you even start with a game like this?

We worked on it at different times between 2016 and 2018. It all started after having some crazy ideas about making a game on CPC. We had done a scroll routine as collaboration for another team and started to think about if *Pinball Dreams* would be possible on the CPC taking advantage of that routine. But before starting, there was a lot of initial analysis work to find out if the project was possible on the CPC at 50fps and with the ball physics at least as good as the original. At that time we made the physics in Java on PC and then we made the maths library for Z80 as a first step. After measuring CPU cycles, structuring the memory so that everything would fit in and implementing the physics on CPC, we had solved the most difficult problem and the rest was only a matter of time.

In hindsight, is there anything you would have done differently?

Sure! I would reorganise collision codes to include more variety of materials and I would try to improve the physics, I even think we'd do it for the new cartridge support, which would allow for larger graphics and more accurate collision tables. Including all the sound, visual and gameplay aspects in one eighth of the original Amiga memory was a great challenge that would have been easier and better on cartridge, but, in general, we are happy with the result.

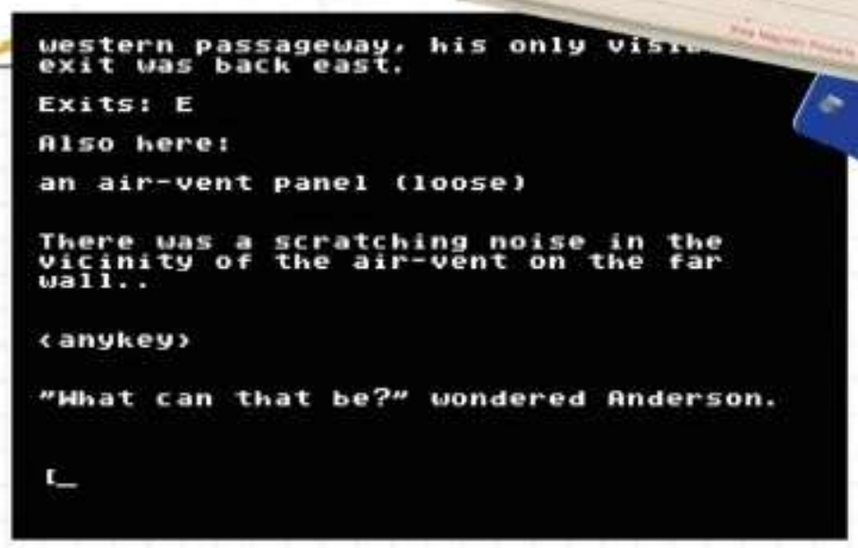
What kind of feedback have you received from Amstrad gamers?

Better than we expected! When you've been in a development for so long it's hard to know how the public will react, and considering that we released a preview some time ago, we thought we'd completely killed the surprise factor, but it looks like we were wrong. As an example, more than 50 videos about the game have been uploaded to YouTube and there were more than 8,000 downloads in the first ten days since the release, which is a great achievement for a CPC game!

Finally, do you have any exciting future plans that our readers would be interested in?

Our plans are to continue making games and demos not only for CPC, but also Amiga, Spectrum and other retro platforms. Our next development on CPC will be a racing game based on classics like *Out Run* or *Lotus*.

» [Amstrad CPC] Blast off into space and explore the universe with Ignition.


western passageway, his only visi
exit was back east.
Exits: E
Also here:
an air-vent panel (loose)
There was a scratching noise in the vicinity of the air-vent on the far wall..
<anykey>
"What can that be?" wondered Anderson.

» [Plus/4] Something has crawled into the ducting, but do we want to see what?

ROCHDALE'S FINEST

Zenobi's John Wilson – sometimes known as the Rochdale Balrog – has been remarkably busy recently. He's working away at porting the venerable software company's text adventures to the Commodore Plus/4 which has in turn seen over twenty five appearing in the space of a month, giving Plussy owners lots of new puzzles to ponder over.

These new releases can be downloaded from Plus/4 World at Kikstart.me.uk/balrog-264 including *The Secret Of Little Hodcome*, *Alien Research Centre 2* and the wonderfully descriptive *Ramsbottom Smith And The Quest For the Yellow Spheroid*.

» [C64] Wandering around a spaceship in search of objects to use as valves.

LOVING THE ALIEN

Staying with conversions, developer Rod – part of the amusingly named group Rod & Emu – has recently put out a version of Ultimate's isometric 3D exploration game *Alien 8*, the release of which completes the ambitious task of porting the previously missing Filmation titles to the C64.

It's impressive, running as fast as or in some cases faster than existing 8-bit versions while offering support for further hardware-based acceleration among its many features and enhancements. Explorers can start searching for more information at Kikstart.me.uk/alien8-c64.

DO YOU REMEMBER?

Originally released on the ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC and C64 by budget purveyors Mastertronic, a homebrew conversion of *Pulsoids* was developed on the Oric series in 2003 by Twilighte. The game itself is based on *Arkanoid* but with a twist, rather than bouncing balls, the player's paddle is instead used to deflect lines which travel at 45-degree angles.

That might sound easier to play than the traditional formula, since that movement is more predictable and therefore easier to follow with the paddle, but it turns out that keeping the line in play takes concentration and skill, even more so when they split since there can be several fast-moving objects bouncing around the screen to keep an eye on.

Pulsoids is available from Kikstart.me.uk/pulsoids-oric and bundled with the Oricutron emulator at Kikstart.me.uk/oricutron.

» [Atari 8-bit] Exploring darkened caves is dangerous, so always take a lamp.

» [Atari 8-bit] Lots of spikes barring Joe's way, some more obvious than others.

» [Plus/4] Thankfully, these large spaceship-sized lifts don't play muzak.

ALPHARAY

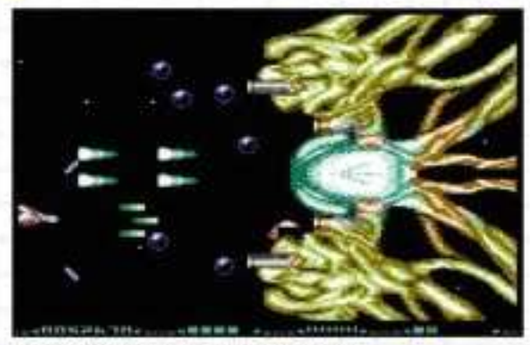
» **PLATFORM:** COMMODORE PLUS/4 » **DEVELOPER:** BAUKNECHT » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/ALPHARAY-264 » **PRICE:** FREE DOWNLOAD, £6.99 ON DISK

In the future, multi-planet-sized corporations will, rather than focusing on stock prices or their market share, instead be interested on universal domination presumably because subjugating potential customers is more efficient than market research. The recent discovery of interstellar wormholes which can be used to deliver payloads of automated assault craft via huge transport ships has led to the start of an aggressive expansion to other sectors, with every world in their path succumbing to corporate greed at least until Archeron because that's where the fight against capitalism is going to start.

About to take on seemingly insurmountable odds is the Alpharay, an exceptionally capable spaceship which can be upgraded with items conveniently left lying around by the enemies. The most important factor is the pilot's skill however, because the action takes place in the gaps between components of the various corporate strongholds which doesn't leave a lot of room to manoeuvre, especially when there's a lot of enemies in play. It's fortunate, then, that bumping into landscape features isn't fatal and only collisions with the enemies or, if the *Alpharay*'s shields are depleted, bullets will destroy the craft outright.

That leniency doesn't make the task of blasting everything to pieces particularly easy however, the levels are long and the mostly horizontal scrolling can change speed, pause or sometimes head off in a different direction. As with all good horizontal shoot-'em-ups, learning the lay of the land and where enemies are going to appear is vital to success and, while there's a generous number of lives available, losing one of them sees a replacement for the player's craft materialising at a checkpoint.

Collision detection can be a little unforgiving at times, which in turn does lead to the occasional frustrating death but that's par for the course for games like *Gradius* or *R-Type* which presumably inspired Alpharay's developers, so anybody looking for that kind of hardcore scrolling shoot-'em-up who has access to a Plus/4 or a C16 with extra RAM should definitely give this a blast.



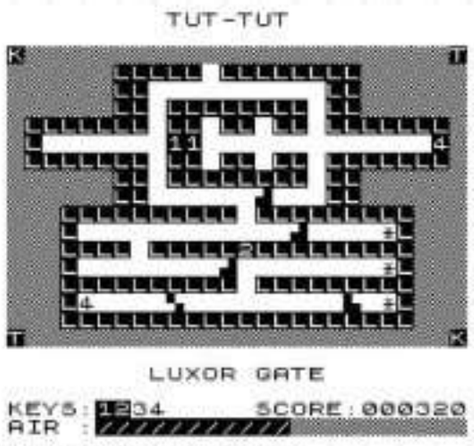
» [Plus/4] Meet the new boss, larger and scarier than the mid-level boss.

» [Plus/4] This part of level two has large blocks flying in to avoid.

>> Score **91%**

TUT-TUT

» **PLATFORM:** SINCLAIR ZX81 (16K) » **DEVELOPER:** DAVID STEPHENSON » **DL:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/TUT-TUT-ZX81 » **PRICE:** £TBA, CASSETTE



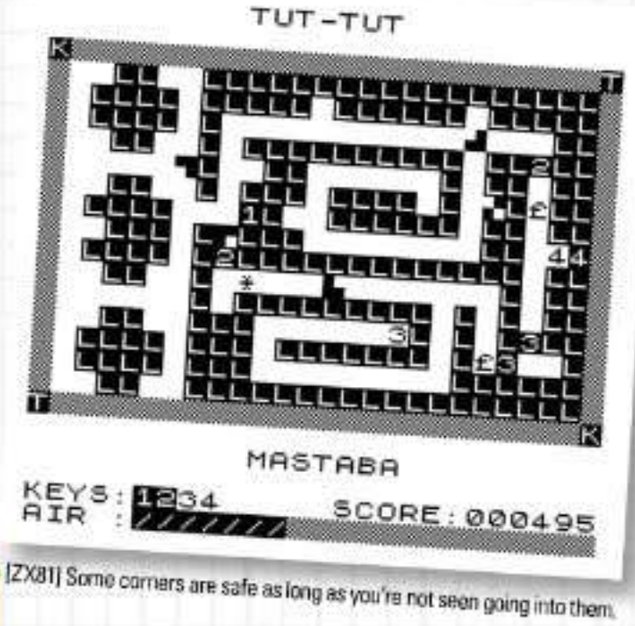
» [ZX81] A mad dash for key number four before the mummy comes back.

After spending most of 1921 vainly searching, the location of the fabled Pharoah's tomb looks to be retaining its secrets... until tall tales of local tomb raiders being attacked by mummies reach your ears. You might not believe in such things, but right now you'll take any lead which presents itself.

Surprisingly, the stories turn out to be true. On the plus side that means finding tombs full of priceless artefacts of great historical importance, but the minus is that they're actually defended by the undead and you'll need to both outrun and outthink them to gather up the treasures.

Completing each chamber involves collecting numbered keys to unlock doors including the exit. This task is made more challenging by the Pharoah's guardians roaming the corridors – some items are harder to reach because of them – but the undead aren't particularly bright and can be avoided with some planning.

» Score **81%**



» [ZX81] Some corners are safe as long as you're not seen going into them.

ASTRO BLASTER

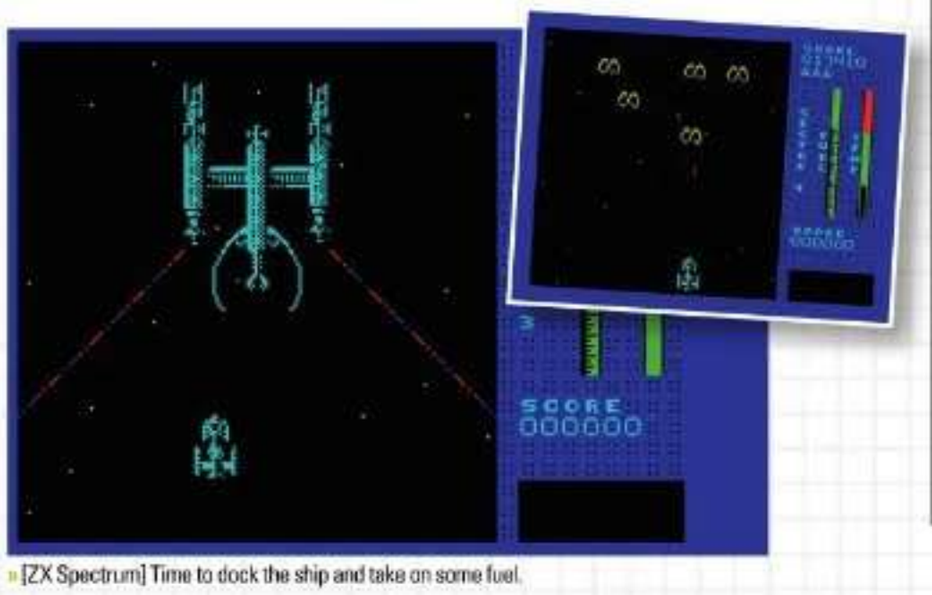
» **PLATFORM:** ZX SPECTRUM » **DEVELOPER:** MATT JACKSON » **PRICE:** FREE » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/ASTRO-BLASTER-SPEC

Based on the coin-op of the same name, which was released in 1981 by Sega and Gremlin, *Astro Blaster* is a gallery shoot-'em-up with a few differences. Yes, there are the relentless waves of enemies to destroy but the ship has a limited fuel supply so you must top up regularly to avoid becoming a sitting duck.

To make things more difficult, the ship's weapons also have a temperature gauge which slowly creeps upwards with each shot fired, so simply blazing away will eventually max it out, which in turn leads to an enforced cooling off period before firing can be resumed.

This managing of resources is challenging in the middle of a pitched battle and takes some acclimatisation, but players must be both frugal and accurate with their bullets to take out waves as quickly as possible and reach the next refuelling station without too many overheats.

» Score **88%**



» [ZX Spectrum] Time to dock the ship and take on some fuel.

» [ZX Spectrum] The glade has been corrupted, so Nixy has a difficult job ahead.

ROUNDUP

Nixy The Glade Sprite returns for a second platform-based outing on the Spectrum. This new adventure continues where the first left off, with Nixy in search of the Seeds Of Doom which she believes are responsible for the corruption that threatens her home. Head to Kikstart.me.uk/nixy-2-spec, and owners of ULA Plus-enhanced systems or emulators have the option of playing with an alternative palette of colours.

Over on the Atari 8-bit, *Moon Patrol Redux* is a visual overhaul of Atari's own conversion of the Irem classic, originally released in 1982. The changes are almost exclusively cosmetic, cleaning up rough edges on what was already a solid game. For an insight into what was done, and the download, head your way over to Kikstart.me.uk/patrol-redux-a8.

DMG DEALS DAMAGE

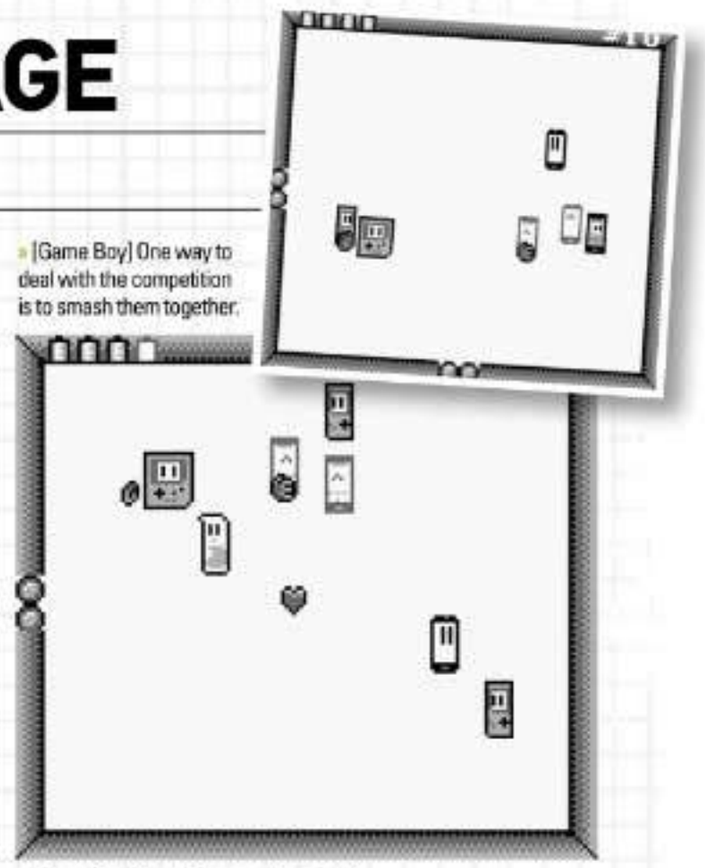
» **PLATFORM:** GAME BOY » **DEVELOPER:** DR LUDOS » **DOWNLOAD:** KIKSTART.ME.UK/DMG-GB » **PRICE:** NAME YOUR OWN

The Game Boy has turned 30, but the birthday celebrations might be soured by all of the other mobile gaming devices it's taken on over the years. That means the enemies include clones or competitors of the Game Boy, its predecessor the Microvision and a range of mobile phones, some of which are hardier than others.

In this action game, the player controls an original Game Boy called DMG – short for Dot Matrix Game – and must use the console's two buttons to operate its independently controlled hands, grabbing attacking handhelds and throwing them at each other or the playfield walls to take out the competition and unlock the next room.

Developer Dr Ludos has a track record for quirky and fun games and this is another example. The first screens are pretty easy, but the difficulty ramps up around when the first boss appears where minions must be captured to use as projectiles.

» Score **86%**



» [Game Boy] One way to deal with the competition is to smash them together.

» [Game Boy] There's some extra health on hand, if DMG can survive to collect it.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

READERS TAKE US THROUGH **THE RETRO KEYHOLE**

PANZER DRAGOON SAGA

"Microsoft had some wild Bing.com cashback promo going on where they were giving back 50% of any eBay purchase. Through this, I got the game for $180. That was the most I'd ever paid for a game. Upon receiving it, I played through it and it's now one of my favourites!"

PAID: $180

BIO

NAME:
Josh Fairhurst

FAVOURITE CONSOLE:
Dreamcast

LOCATION:
United States

TWITTER:
@LimitedRunJosh

DUCK TALES 2

"This game is insanely valuable now, but I paid less than $10 for it when I got it back in 1994. I wouldn't get my Genesis until the end of 1994, so I was still buying NES games when others had moved on."

PAID: $9.95

FAR FROM LIMITED

A collection to dream about

Josh Fairhurst certainly knows the appeal of collecting games. He set up Limited Run Games with Douglas Bogart in 2015 and specialises in releasing physical products of digital-only releases. As you may have guessed, he takes his own personal collecting very seriously.

"I started consciously collecting games when I was 11," he tells us. "I had just discovered Yahoo! Auctions – this was 1998, I think – and I bought an Atari and Master System along with some games for each. Prior to then, I had held on to all of the games I'd acquired in my life but I don't think I'd realised that I was collecting games yet."

When you start looking through his collection, though, it becomes clear that Josh has plenty of interest in Sega. What is it he loves about the Japanese publisher? "Growing up, my older brother was the Nintendo kid," he explains. "He bought his SNES with his own money and as such, the SNES stayed in his room and he did not allow me to play it. Our grandparents bought us a Genesis for Christmas in 1994, so all of my 16-bit gaming was done there. By 1999, I was pushing Beanie Babies and Pokémon Cards on eBay and I was able to earn enough money to buy my own brand-new Sega Dreamcast when it launched in the US on 9 September 1999. The Dreamcast cemented my love for Sega and turned me into a bona fide Sega fanboy."

Josh's love for the Dreamcast has grown stronger over time, and he now has a complete set of US and PAL games. "I hit a point in 2016, I think, where I realised that I already owned the majority of the rare and valuable games," he says. "I started off slowly buying the common games I was missing with credit card rewards points, and by 2017 I had successfully completed the set. I have ambitions to play every game and catalogue my experiences if I ever find myself retired after Limited Run Games."

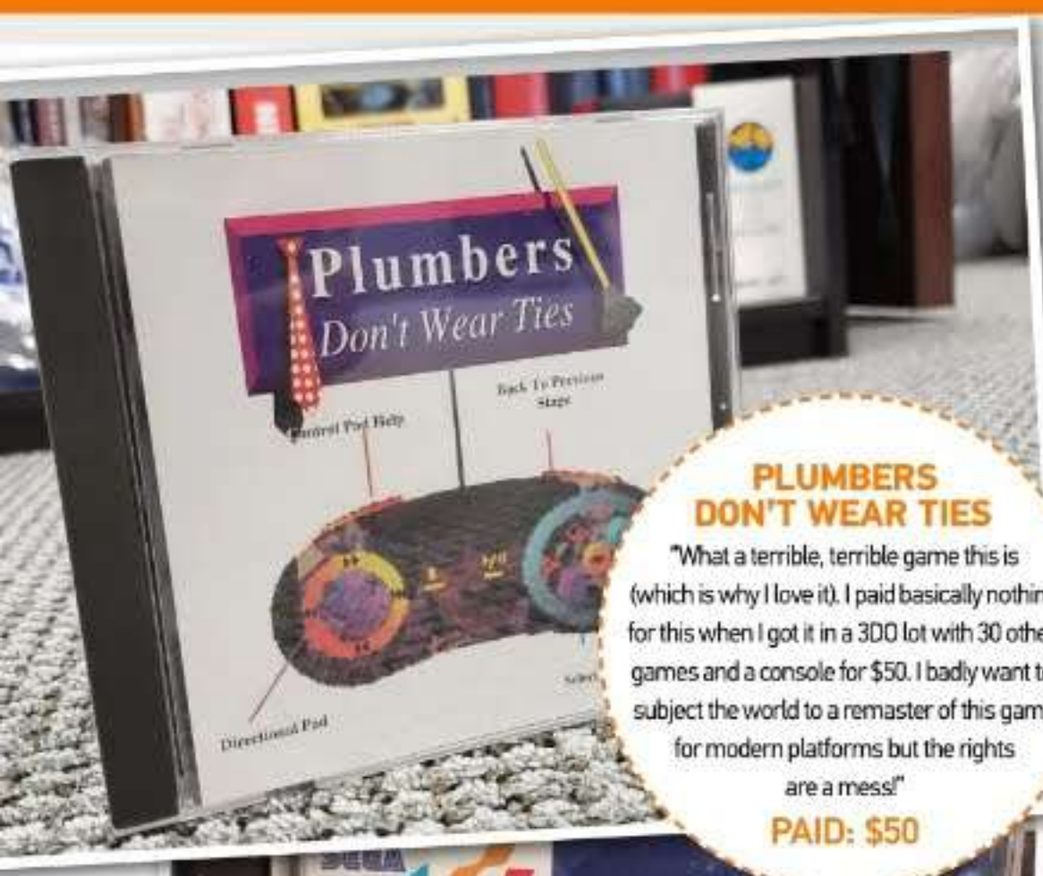
So when you've collected all the western releases for a system, going after the Japanese titles seems the next obvious step and it's something Josh is certainly keen on attempting. "Yes, I am currently in the process of picking up all the Japanese exclusives – even the ones I have zero ability to play – because I am a crazy person that constantly craves more Dreamcast content," he happily admits to us.

So as a collector and seller of valuable and collectible games does Josh think that the time for collecting classic games has ended? "It depends. I think what is 'classic' is subjective," he explains. "The Wii isn't classic to me, but the weird reality is that an 18-year-old probably had their first gaming memories on that platform. That thing is as classic to them as the Master System was to me when I picked up mine. It's affordable for people to acquire Wii stuff right now – but a lot of the earlier stuff is definitely planted in unaffordable territory for most people at this point."

So with the rising prices of games, what's Josh's advice for budding collectors? "Initially, buy the games that matter the most to you," he concludes. "Save the less exciting stuff for last!"

Got an impressive collection of your own? Contact us at:

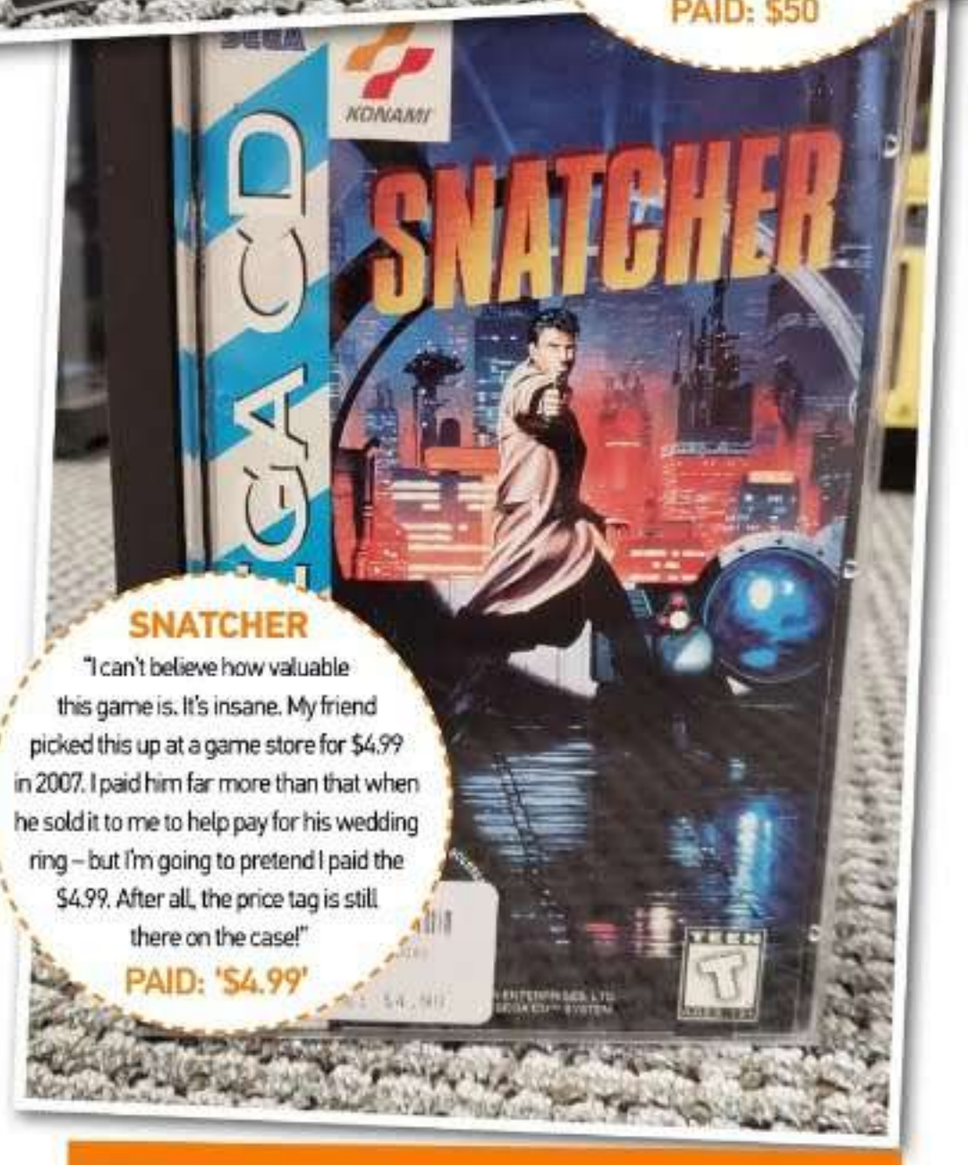
RetroGamerUK @RetroGamer_Mag retrogamer@futurenet.com



PLUMBERS DON'T WEAR TIES

"What a terrible, terrible game this is (which is why I love it). I paid basically nothing for this when I got it in a 300 lot with 30 other games and a console for $50. I badly want to subject the world to a remaster of this game for modern platforms but the rights are a mess!"

PAID: $50



SNATCHER

"I can't believe how valuable this game is. It's insane. My friend picked this up at a game store for $4.99 in 2007. I paid him far more than that when he sold it to me to help pay for his wedding ring – but I'm going to pretend I paid the $4.99. After all, the price tag is still there on the case!"

PAID: '$4.99'

JEWEL IN THE CROWN

FINAL FANTASY XV: A KING'S TALE PROMOTIONAL CARTRIDGE

"One of the developers of this digital-only spin-off gifted me this boxed promotional item. I don't know how many of these Square Enix made, but it's very cool and very rare (I got slammed on Reddit because people didn't believe this was even real)."

PAID: FREE

BARGAIN HUNT

Your guide to the rising world of retro prices

THE COVER STAR

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

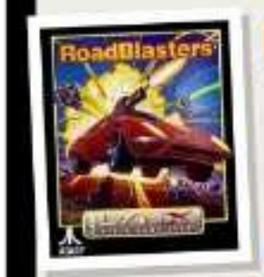
You've got a couple of options if you're after this BioWare classic and neither is very expensive. The Xbox version sells between **£5** and **£10**, which is a pretty great price for such an amazing game. The PC version is a little cheaper, starting at **£4**, while the Mac version starts at a **fiver**.

TIME CRISIS

Namco's PlayStation conversion offers plenty of blasting at a cheap price. The PAL version is available for as little as **£2**, but if you fancy the version that comes boxed with a G-CON you'll be looking to spend at least **£20**.

STREET RACER

There are lots of versions of Ubisoft's kart racer, so we'll cover a few here. The SNES version sells for around **£15**, while the Mega Drive version starts from **£8**. The PlayStation offering is yours for **£4**, while the Saturn version starts from **£14**.



ROADBLASTERS

Well this is going up in price. Darran paid **£7** for a copy five years ago, but now you'll struggle to find a complete one in good condition for under **£25**.

GHOST HUNTERS

If you're eager to replay this early offering from the Oliver twins you won't have to pay to much. It ranges from **£1.99** for the Spectrum version to **£5** for the Amstrad offering.

HARDWARE HUNT

DREAMCAST FISHING CONTROLLER

The Fission alternative can be had from around **£11** unboxed to **£35** complete. If you want the stick featured in this month's peripheral vision it starts at **£15** unboxed and sells for as much as **£100** complete!

HOW MUCH?!

ELIMINATE DOWN

On 10 November a sealed copy of the average Mega Drive shooter *Eliminate Down* sold on eBay for a staggering **$28,000**. The excitement was short-lived, however, as it appears to have been relisted and is still available for the same asking price.

Prices correct at time of print

MAILBAG

HAVE YOUR SAY... SEND US A LETTER OR MAKE YOURSELF HEARD ON THE ONLINE FORUM – **WWW.RETROGAMER.NET**

WIN!

Every month, one lucky writer-in will receive a spanking copy of either our NES/Master System or SNES/Mega Drive books

STAR LETTER

IS IT RETRO?

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
The other day my 22-year-old son was reading your brilliant magazine and was complaining about the lack of PS2 content in it. "But son, the PlayStation 2 isn't really retro, so it's not going to get a lot of coverage," I sagely told him. "Says who?" was his immediate answer, and to be honest I didn't really know what to say to him. "It's just the way it is, son," I told him and left it at that.

It did make me wonder just what retro is and how a magazine like **Retro Gamer** determines where the cutoff point for retro gaming ends. You often mention modern games in your history articles, which is a little weird to see, so I would be interested to learn what the team considers to be retro, if only so I have a definitive answer to tell my son.
Paul Brookes

Ah, the age-old question of what is and isn't retro. It crops up most months, and there's no real answer because retro means different things to different people. From our own point of view we now have a soft cutoff point of 15 years or so, meaning the PlayStation, Xbox and GameCube are certainly fair game.

» [PS2] Imagine being young enough to have this as your first *OutRun* experience. We're rather jealous.

DO SOMETHING!

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
Where's my article about the Nintendo DS? The system is more than old enough to feature in the magazine, but you've not run a proper article on it yet. Sure there's been the odd smaller article about certain games (I loved the *Phoenix Wright* Making Of you ran) but I want more. Nintendo's handheld is still brilliant fun to play and it has an incredible range of diverse games, from obscure curious to big hitters like *Zelda* and *Mario*. I'd love to see more coverage of it in the mag.
Simon Norris

» We so didn't use Pictochat for things like that...

» [PC] It's always nice when a reader discovers a new game thanks to the magazine.

The DS is certainly something we'll cover in the future, Simon, but we'd like to get hold of some bigwigs at Nintendo for it. In the meantime, you can look forward to the odd games-related feature. Darran's been promising one looking at all the games that feature 'DS' in their titles – *Castlevania: Dawn Of Sorrow, Dig-Dug: Digging Strike* – for ages now, so you never know.

A REAL FANTASY

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I ordered *Final Fantasy XII* after reading about it in your magazine and I've finally gotten around to playing it. What a great game it is! Sure the story is rather derivative and it's clearly based on *Star Wars*, but I've still had a lot of fun with it. I think it's largely down to the characters, who are all interesting and have largely solid arcs. It also helps that the combat system is excellent and easily one of the best I've experienced in a Japanese RPG. The biggest thing I found though is just how modern the game feels, even though it came out in 2006. It really does appear to be ahead of its time. Anyway, thanks for covering a game I never expected to be any good. I'm glad to be proven wrong.
Christopher Reynolds

Glad to hear you're enjoying the game. Darran's been playing it for the first time too, and he's also enjoying it, largely because he's a big *Star Wars* fan. It's always nice when a game surprises you and exceeds your expectations.

FORCE FARCE

Dear **Retro Gamer**,
I noticed the intentional error on page 75 of issue 198 of **Retro Gamer** magazine regarding the caption to the *Star Wars Chess* screenshot. As most sci-fi fans will know, Seven Of Nine was a character from *Star Trek* and did not appear in a galaxy far, far away. Certainly the Force was not with the caption writers on this occasion!
Yours sincerely,
Stuart Hardy

Thanks for getting in touch, Stuart. If you look at any of our *Star Wars* articles you'll probably find out that what you've stumbled upon is a running joke. There's certainly nothing like that in this issue...

» [PC] Stuart spotted our intentional *Star Wars* joke. Good job we didn't put any in the cover feature...

Don't forget to follow us online for all the latest retro updates

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CONTACT US

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Email: retrogamer@futurenet.com

SHEN-MOOD

My Kickstarter copy of *Shenmue III* finally arrived today, and I was interested to hear your take on the whole *Shenmue III* kickstarter debacle?

I'm sure you already know, but the original Kickstarter backers like myself have had to wait longer to get the game than non-backers who bought it in the shops at release. Not to mention that we have ended up paying more for our Kickstarter copies than non-backers have paid for their retail copies on the day of release!

Also, some retail purchases seemed to have received some kind of 'Day One' bonus in the form of downloadable content, whereas the only thing we've got to show for our $60 investment is a four-year wait and a measly cardboard slip cover! Sorry for the rant. Its just annoying.

All the best,

Nick Pointer

Thanks for getting in touch, Nick. While our own Features Editor (who also backed the campaign) says the DLC doesn't offer anything you can't get from just playing the game, he does agree it should have been offered to backers. As for the other points, it seems you've been a little unlucky. Everyone we personally knew who backed the campaign received the game ahead of its retail release and no one appears to have ended up paying more. Your best bet is to probably get in touch with the campaign organisers and go from there.

GIMMIE GIFTS

Dear **Retro Gamer**,

Well done for getting to 200 issues. One of my favourite things about **Retro Gamer** is that the free gifts are brilliant. The thing is that in issue one, a disc with games on it came free. Will you do this again, or is there a reason why they don't come with the magazine?

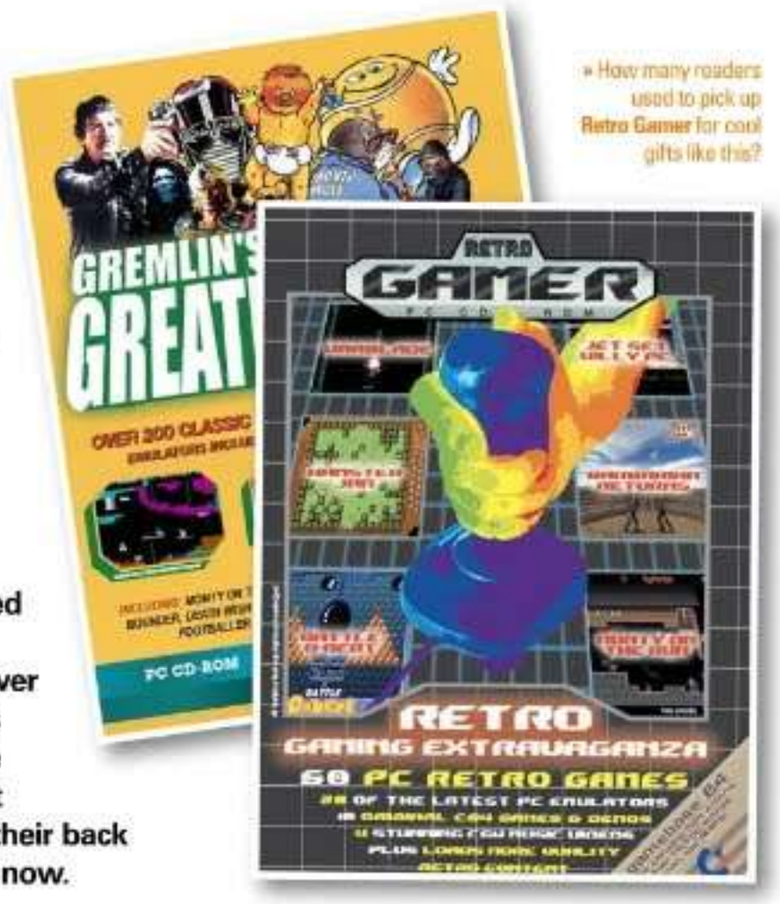
Alex Kelly

We're glad you enjoyed the issue, Alex. It's highly unlikely we'll ever give away free games on a disc in the future as publishers are a lot more aware of what their back catalogues are worth now.

DISCUSSED THIS MONTH

Die Hard

It's that time of the year where everyone teases Darran by telling him that *Die Hard* is clearly a Christmas movie [It bloody isn't - Ed]. Andy has been slyly asking Darran if he thinks *Home Alone* is a Christmas movie, revealing that it's *Die Hard* for kids. Nick feels it's a Christmas movie. Drew doesn't care, but loves poking Darran, just to see how angry he gets.



» How many readers used to pick up Retro Gamer for cool gifts like this?

Your say

Every month, Retro Gamer asks a question on social media and prints the best replies. This month we wanted to know...

What's your favourite location in a videogame?

Drew Littler
It's gotta be Firelink Shrine in *Dark Souls*. After a run down into Blight Town (or wherever), finally coming back to the bonfire to rest, level up and chat to the NPCs is a wonderful change of pace (before doing it all again).

ncf1
For me its a split between the City Of Lost Heaven in *Mafia*, which immerses you so effectively in another time period, and the amazing sepia-shaded world of *Resident Evil 4* of which there is nothing quite like it.

Oliver Boulton-Lear
I would have to choose *Silent Hill* for its relaxing atmosphere and charming local characters.

@oodlesODimm
The save room in the Raccoon City Police station, under the stairs with the dark room attached to it.

Paul Staddon
The Harborline track in *Ridge Racer* always seemed pretty pleasant to me, eternal sunshine and a nearby beach... you've just gotta watch crossing the road.

@Jacobs_Lair_
Shadow Moses Island followed closely by Midgar.

learnedrobb
The West Mansion from *Splatterhouse*, and the 'hidden mansion' from *Splatterhouse 2*. Atmospheric and suitably gruesome.

» [PC] We're guessing Oliver Boulton-Lear is something of a joker.

Dale Muir
Maridia from *Super Metroid*. The graphics and score really nail the feeling of isolation (although I find it soothing).

Steve J Potter
Green Hill Zone in the original *Sonic*. That music when it starts with the green landscapes and blue sky just makes me smile.

Kai Lunk
Every death trap-filled location in *Space Quest II*. Death has never been so much fun!

Espen Samuelsen
Rubacava in *Grim Fandango*, the mood is just right. It made a lasting impression on me the first time I played it!

@Dr_Kung
Final Fantasy VII's towns are my favourites, but I'm unsure which I like most. It's either Timber or Fisherman's Horizon. [It's definitely Timber! – Ed]

@rebecca_raper
The Fairy Grounds in *Ni No Kuni* is pretty cool.

retro GAMER

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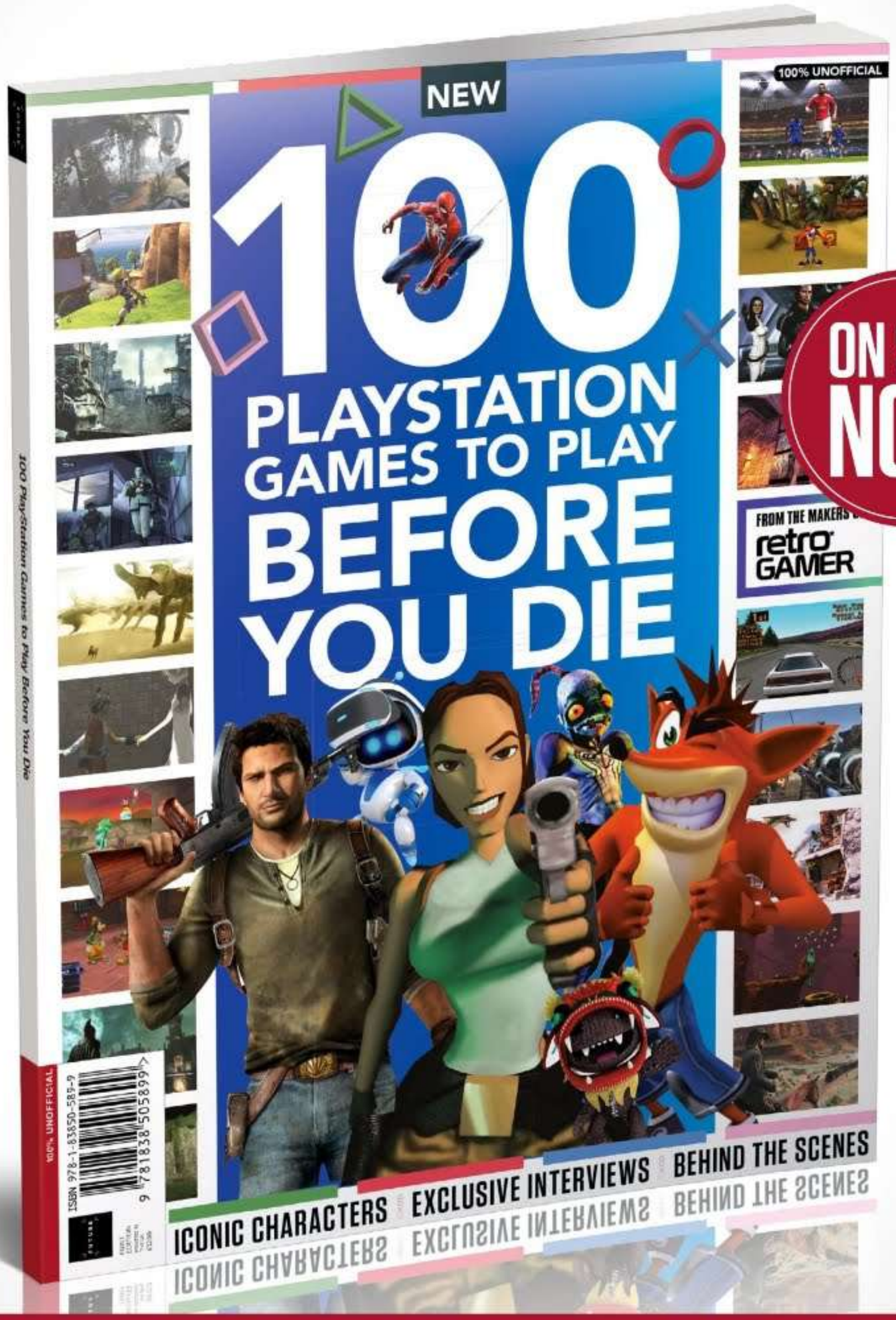

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ENDGAME

COMMAND & CONQUER: NOD ENDING

» You know, the GDI likes to characterise the Brotherhood Of Nod as a terrorist group. But for those of us on the inside, it's a brotherhood of love. The prophet Kane has brought humanity from the caves to the pinnacle of civilisation – and on our road to ascension, he takes care to consider the needs and wishes of faithful members of the organisation. How, you ask? Well, here's an example...

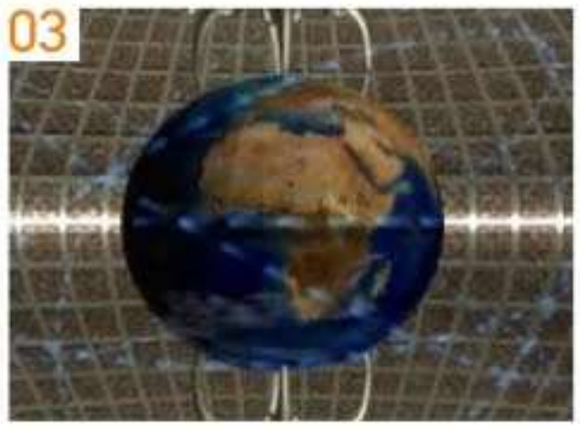
01

» Congratulations! You've done a brilliant job, and Kane has singled you out for special praise. Within moments, the Brotherhood Of Nod will have achieved victory over the corrupt GDI, and your strategic excellence made that possible.

02

» How will Kane display his dominance? Well, he's going to use a bunch of hackers to take control of something really cool. Ignore the fact that it looks like a Nineties sci-fi movie, and concentrate on the world conquest bit.

03



» The hackers are in. To show his gratitude, Kane presents you with the world – or more specifically, the chance to utterly destroy a very specific portion of it. He suggests some targets, including the Eiffel Tower and the White House.

04

» You have your own target in mind. In fact, you've known exactly what you'd do in this situation for a very long time. The command is sent and out in orbit, the hijacked ion cannon begins to hum with the enormous flow of energy. You brace for the coming impact...

05

» Boom! A particle beam obliterates the Palace Of Westminster, sending Big Ben crashing down into the streets of London. You gaze upon the chaos and destruction with quiet satisfaction, for although the GDI labelled you a menace, you know that this was the true home of the vile and villainous.

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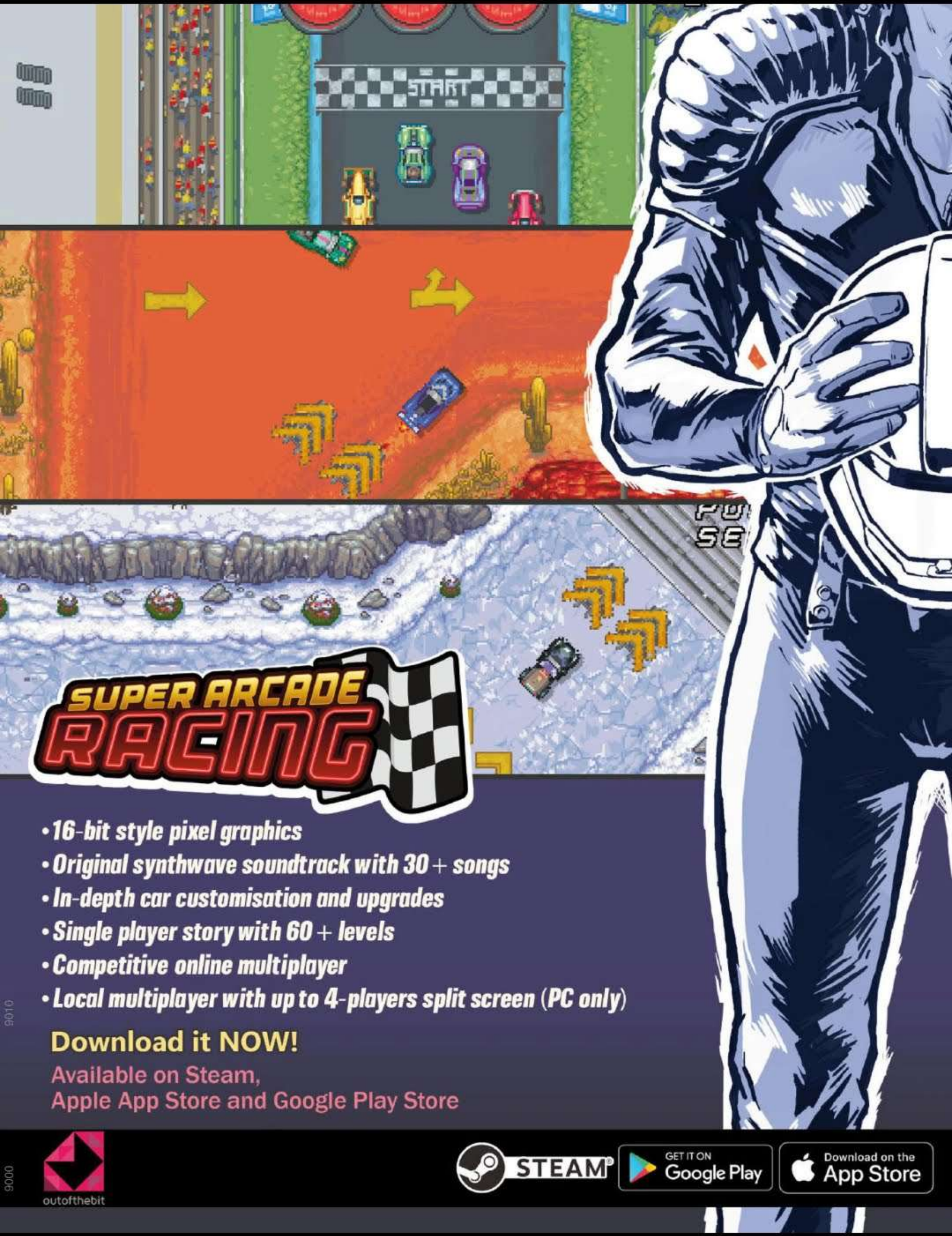
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